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MODERN WRITERS AND PLAYWRIGHTS

W. H. DAVIES by Thomas Moulton

MODERN WRITERS AND PLAYWRIGHTS

EDITED BY THOMAS MOULT

W. H. DA VIES by **Thomas Moul**
JAMES JOYCE by **Louis Golding**
GEORGE MOORE by **Humbert Wolfe**

MODERN WRITERS AND PLAYWRIGHTS
Edited by Thomas Moulton

W. H. DAVIES

by
THOMAS MOULT



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I WISH to acknowledge the help, during the preparation of this little book, of Mr. Davies and his chief publishers, Messrs. Jonathan Cape Ltd., who have not only made many excellent suggestions but also given me ready permission to use my extracts from the poetry. To Mr. Davies's other publishers I also make a thankful acknowledgment.

To avoid a reiteration that might have become annoying to the reader, and not from any lack of courtesy, I have discarded in the text of this book the prefix " Mr. " before my subject's name.

T. M.

Chapter I

Tramp-Royal

i

IT was a wintry night in Canada, soon after the beginning of the century. Darkness had fallen on the prairie, a snowy darkness, silent and grey. Two men moved along the thin quavering line of railroad that cut through the long lonely spaces between Ottawa and Winnipeg, and so across the vast plains of the West, where the horizon retreated before the travellers all day, for many days*

The two men were limping. They had tramped across the American frontier to Montreal, Klondyke-bound through Winnipeg. Their movements were stealthy. By stealing train-rides at every opportunity they had eased their feet, saved their energy, and shaken off, time and again, the depressing feeling that they were only travelling from nowhere to nowhere. They had determined to steal four or five hundred miles more: the great overland express was due, and it would stop at the railway station they were now leaving after a

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luxurious day-long rest in the ramshackle waiting-room. They planned to conceal themselves in an empty car that stood in a siding a short distance outside the station, until the overland, resuming its journey, came slowly along ; and as they slunk through the snow towards their hiding-place they cast wary glances behind them to make certain they were unobserved by the railroad officials and passengers grouping on the station platform.

One of that pair of tramps was known as Three-fingered Jack, for he had lost two fingers while he worked in cotton mills, years earlier, and since then he had been a " hobo " on both sides of the Atlantic, except when he was a cattleman in Montreal. The other man, whose age was twenty-six or twenty-seven, and who was spoken to by his companion as " Will," though registered in lodging-houses, hospitals, jails, and ships' logs as Davies, seemed of a different quality beneath his roughness. He could spit and curse and go hungry with the best of them, but he had the eyes of one who discerned things and might be sensitive about them in a profoundly individual way. His forehead, moreover, denoted power, the potential power to do something far apart from begging a meal at cottage doors while the menfolk were away working, far different from taking a ride on the outside of a train that is tearing all night through the icy plains, tunnels, and eternal

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snows of "heaven-aspiring mountains." And in his heart, although he could not have had more than a vague apprehension of them, were poems. . . . Poems that would be born, perhaps, only after many years and, living, remain a miracle before which men would marvel in a manner to which they were impelled by no other poet of the age.

But here, in the prairie darkness, cold and grey, he was a tramp, crouching with his companion in an empty freight car as they awaited the coming of the overland express. And whatever gift of awareness he may have had, one thing he could not discern—the destined sequel to that night's endeavour to steal a ride. He was unaware that his life, so vagrant and purposeless ever since he had crossed to America from his native Wales at the age of twenty, was on the verge of a vital change.

Swiftly, in the very next minutes, that change began. Straining their eyes in the gloom for the approaching train, the two vagrants saw its headlights shining through the wintry air at last, far down the line, and soon it had drawn into the station.

"Come on," urged Three-fingered Jack's companion, "there's no time to lose." And they dropped quietly down from the empty truck, and lurked in the darkness, ready to leap on to the step of the blind luggage car that followed immediately after the engine. A whistle sounded: the

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overland was approaching at last, belching smoke and sparks as it started out of the station towards them, gathering speed so that the two men had to sprint in the same direction with it or they would have been passed in a flash.

Three-fingered Jack made the first jump. Deftly he caught the handle bar and swung on to the step. His companion ran along below, reaching for the handle bar in his turn as he prepared to follow. Instead of making room for him instantly, however, the first man hesitated, and by the time the step was clear the train was travelling swiftly. The second man made a big effort as he gripped the bar more tightly and sprang upward. But the jump had been delayed overlong. His feet missed the step, and he dropped to the snow again, though his hand clung desperately to the handle bar. The train swept him along until he managed to let go, and he went to earth in a heavy, stumbling fall. Snow-flakes and cinders whirled about his prostrate body as the wheels of the train went flying on, on into the night and the great white prairie.

But the man who was left behind had experienced more than a rolling tumble in the snow. He perceived this when, after lying there awhile, he sought to stand up. "Something had happened to prevent me from doing so. Sitting down in an upright position I began to examine

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myself, and found that the right foot was severed from the ankle. This discovery did not shock me so much as the thoughts which quickly followed. For, as I could feel no pain, I did not know but what my body was in several parts, and I was not satisfied until I had examined every portion of it."

After much vain shouting for help, he was discovered and carried to the station waiting-room and a doctor sent for. He observed many people looking in upon him. He has written: "I could see no other way of keeping a calm face before such a number of eyes than by taking out my pipe and smoking, an action which, I am told, caused much sensation in the local press."

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The sequel progressed through its next stage in a hospital, where, after surgical operations that involved the amputation of his footless limb at the knee, he lay nearer death than life for many days. Here he encountered an atmosphere of kind-heartedness, characteristically Canadian it seemed to the stricken man. He was surrounded by books, grapes, bananas, and other delicacies—everything that he might have begged for without avail till doomsday if he had still been a whole-limbed hobo on the road to the Klondyke.

As he lay there his mind moved towards a new

outlook. The beggars he had known faded into the background, Three-fingered Jack as well as Philadelphia Slim and Wee Shorty; Shorty, who bound his hand in white linen, so that he could plead disablement in case he was called on to prove his veracity in any particular instance by being tested with a little job: Windy, the talkative Windy, " whose tongue had entertained many a camp with strange and unique experiences " : and Pennsylvania Dutch, " a faithful friend but a poor beggar, who was no more than a pensioner on Windy's bounty, and acted the part of a manservant." There were also English Harry and the Indian Kid, whom he had encountered in Memphis, and Australian Red, " who it seemed had lost all ambitions for a more respectable life " : Scotty of Baltimore and Brum, who was apparently disgusted with this new innovation called work and could not understand any man's desire for it, and not even for his closest friend's sake would he have become a working man . . . and Cockney More and Donovan, who, as a thief, ran Cockney a good second. Cockney More was a nearly blind ex-cattleman, " but, without doubt, he was a feeler of the first magnitude. If he borrowed a needle, and the said needle was honestly returned, it behoved the lender, knowing the borrower's thievish propensities, carefully to examine it to see that the eye had not been abstracted. For, as

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Donovan remarked, 'Cockney More could steal the milk out of one's tea.'

Into the background faded also the scenes through which he had wandered: great scenes in America and Canada, but which he had known only as a hungry tramp, begging from door to door, sleeping at night by camp fires, and when possible in empty houses. True, he had got some enjoyment out of it, until one Sunday he chanced on a weekly paper, in which he read an appreciation of the poet Burns, with numerous quotations from his works; and this led his thoughts back to the past, the ambition of his early days, and the encouraging words of his elders.

^{(C} As a youngster," he has said on looking back from the elevation of his ultimate success, "I was determined to be famous at any cost. Once I thought it would be as a scientist. I was convinced that there was no sun and moon, but just one disc that atmospheric conditions altered by day and night. I hugged this discovery and felt sure it was going to bring me fame."

Scientist, artist, poet. . . . His boyish ambition rang the changes on each of these. "Ah!" he sighed, folding up the newspaper that contained the eulogy of the great Scottish poet, "if during those five years I had had the daily companionship of good books, instead of all this restless wandering to and fro in a strange land, my mind, at the

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present hour, might be capable of some little achievement of my own."

This thought had been but fleeting when it first came to him, for he was a healthy vagabond, in love with life; but it returned as he lay at the hospital, amid such kindness as "touched me to the heart," and it was this that now sent the crippled man's past life into the background and turned his mind to a new outlook. When he regained consciousness after the doctors had done their work he was greatly surprised to be told that he had "used more foul language in ten minutes' delirium than had probably been used in twenty-four hours by the whole population of Canada." Doubtless he had also muttered, without a single word being understood by those who readily understood his "foul" language, chaotic fragments of the poetry that must have been simmering wordlessly in his brain ever since he had found himself responding with song to the songs of Burns which he had read earlier in that newspaper: crude flashes of beauty, striving to imprint themselves on his sensibility, that the loutish career of the unkempt wanderer had miraculously left unblurred. • . .

O now with drowsy June one hour to be I
Scarce waking strength to hear the hum of bees,
Or catde lowing under shady trees,
Knee-deep in waters loitering to the sea.

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I would that drowsy June awhile were here,
The amorous South wind carrying all the vale—
Save that white lily true to star as pale,
Whose secret day-dream Phoebus burns to hear.

Not yet the unique language, perhaps, but the
visioning, the yearning, the idea.

Life's angel half, sweet Sleep,
When, like the, mermaid, thou
In all thy loveliness
Dost rise from out the deep
Where Life is foul to see—
Men wake to scheme and sin,
But thou dost keep them pure
In that sweet hour with thee.

Not yet the unique language, but, resembling so
^uncannily his everyday speech even then, it was
more imminently his than he knew.

Is Bacchus not the god of gods,
Who gives to Beauty's cheeks their shine ?
O Love, thou art a wingless worm ;
Wouldst thou be winged, fill thee with wine ;
 Fill thee with wine,
 And wings be thine.

Then, Bacchus, rule thy merry race,
And laws like thine who would not keep ?
And when fools weep to hear us laugh,
We'll laugh, ha! ha! to see them weep.
 O god of wine,
 My soul be thine.

" A far different Klondyke had opened up
before my eyes, which corresponded with the

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dreams of my youth. I pictured myself returning home, not with gold nuggets from the far West, but with literary fame, wrested from no less a place than the mighty London." And ere long, limping on crutches, he set his face towards home.

"Soon," he has written, (for William Henry Davies has been his own thoroughgoing and best biographer), "I reached Montreal. Only two months had elapsed, and what a difference now! Two months ago, and it was winter, snow was on the earth, and the air was cold: but I was then full-limbed, full of vitality and good spirits, for summer-like prospects, golden and glorious, possessed me night and day. It was summer now, the earth was dry and green, and the air warm, but winter was within me: for I felt crushed, and staggered on crutches to the danger of myself and the people on my way. I soon got over this unpleasant feeling, roused by the merry-makers aboard ship, the loudest and most persistent, strange to say, being a one-legged man, who defied all Neptune's attempts to make him walk unsteady. Seeing this man so merry, I knew that my sensitiveness would soon wear off; and seeing him so active was a great encouragement."

in

Having lost his foot and left it "buried in Ontario," and returned to England, the wanderer

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whom we know as Will Davies did no more wandering for two years. He stayed awhile at his old home in Newport, Monmouthshire, enjoying a legacy from his grandmother which amounted at first to ten shillings a week but was afterwards reduced to eight shillings. He "sat, dreaming, reading, and occasionally writing in a leafy bower in the garden." Soon he was able to dispense with crutches, having received an artificial limb; and when he had practised walking with "a success that was gratifying," he bade farewell to his people and, possessing "a cotton shirt, a pair of stockings and a handkerchief in a brown paper parcel, and the sum of two pounds in his pocket, after the expense of the train fare," he set out on the "conquest" of London. His failure in the States, and again in Canada, had made him, he has confessed, a little more chary with his confidence, but he was "not in the least the less optimistic."

"My first dreams were, and are, my best." And they were dreams that had nothing to do with worldly prosperity. He scorned clothes and jewellery: he would "rather take a free country walk, leaving the roads for the less trodden paths of the hills and the lanes, than ride in a yacht or a coach"; he would "rather see the moon in the sky than the gaslight of an assembly room"; gluttony he despised, and by him drink was "seldom taken except at the invitation of other eyes." Looking

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back in later life he wrote a poem entitled " The Philosophical Beggar," in which he pursued the theme:

If rich men are the winter's kings, the kings
Of summer are true beggars—that be sure.
Then, happy beggars can recline on stones
With more content than lords sit cushioned chairs;
Their pleasant houses are the leafy trees,
Whose floors are carpeted with grass or moss;
They sleep upon the new-mown hay at night,
And in the daytime to their liking mix
The sun and shade. Oft in forsaken house—
Where spirits drove the living out—they sleep:
Ghosts cannot deal with beggars bold, who have
Less reverence than the spiders that weave webs
Inside the sacred nostrils of a joss.
And see our health ; we live on sun and air,
Plain food and water, and outlive rich men,
With all their physic, wines and cleanliness.

Then what, he asks, would be to him the silver and gold of all Alaska ?

He found lodging at sixpence a night in the Blackfriars Road. A small, pale-faced child led him up the doss-house stairs to a bedroom in which there were a number of beds, and pointing to one said: " You are number forty-five." Many of the beds already contained sleepers.

" I sat down on the edge of mine wondering if there would be any disturbance in the night, whether any of these men would take a fancy to my clothes, or in the dark were likely to rummage

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their contents. The man in the next bed coughed, and then, turning towards me, said gently :

" 'The beds are good, I admit, but that's all you can say of this house.'

" Second voice, not far away: ' You've come to a good house, you have, and yer don't know it.'

" First voice: * If I hadn't been drunk last night and got chucked out of Rowton's, I wouldn't on any account be here.'

" A third voice, distant, but loud and angry: * Give over, will yer; when are you coves going to sleep ? I ain't done any labour for three weeks, and now as I've got a chance at four in the morning, blow me if I ain't robbed of my slumber. Take care I don't set about yer at once, yer blooming lot of bleeders. If I come arter yer body, yer'll know it, and no mistake about it, either.'"

Next morning Will Davies sought out Rowton House. He argued that they had refused the man a bed owing to his being drunk, and more than likely, quarrelsome in drink ; this, therefore, must be strong recommendation after experiencing a lodging at which it would be impossible either to read, write, or think, or even to partake of meals in comfort. At Rowton House he found that for his sixpence a night he was offered not only a clean bed, bath, sitting-room, and other comforts

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but a "library," composed of "two large cases of books, one containing fiction, and the other being enriched by the poets, historians, essayists, with biography and miscellaneous literature/'

At once he paid a week's lodgings down. And as he sat in that doss-house library, so quiet in spite of the presence of over a hundred men, he would watch the faces of his fellow-lodgers. "Some of them were of refined appearance, with their silk hats, their frock coats, cuffs and collars, and spoke in voices subdued and gentle. Some of them were of such a prosperous appearance that no doubt I had already passed them in the street, thinking they were either merchants or managers of great concerns : and, more likely than not, the paper-boys had followed on their heels, and the cabmen had persistently hailed them."

It was at one of these places that he realized with full force what a lonely place, "an isolated plague spot," a common lodging-house can be. "It is very pathetic," he has written, "on a Christmas morning to see seventy or eighty men in a common lodging-house, and not six of them receive any greetings from the outside world. In one house, where the manager's charming little daughter received scores of letters and presents from school friends and friends of her parents, there were not ten out of ninety lodgers who received a single letter—on a Christmas morning !"

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In such a home, in that South London lodging-house, which, well-ordered and clean though he found it, he called an "isolated plague spot," W. H. Davies lived for two years. Here he did his own cooking, and lived so abstemiously that, "renouncing drink and the pleasures of the theatre," tobacco was his only luxury; and pursuing this Spartan mode he set to work with his pen in earnest, the first result being a blank-verse tragedy, full of action, entitled "The Robber." It was written within two months, and that probably is what was the matter with it, for when he submitted the manuscript to a theatre-manager it came back to him "with regret" after three days.

His next work was a very long poem, "in which the beasts of the field, the birds of the air, and even the fishes of the sea, met in a forest glade to impeach man for his cruelty to them"; and the poem went on to describe the midnight journey of beasts, birds, and fishes to the nearest town, and the vengeance they then took on the sleeping inhabitants. Again disappointment, awaited him—a double disappointment this time, for he had thought to speed up its acceptance by making two copies of the poem and posting them simultaneously to separate publishers. And they were returned on successive mornings.

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Short poems followed long poems, and these, written as they were in the sonnet-form that requires expert technique, not surprisingly met with a similar fate. Then came another poetical tragedy, a comedy, a volume, of humorous essays, and hundreds more short poems. These he stored up, and after a year's hard labour, gathered the best of them into a small volume and sent it to a well-known publisher. The publisher's reply was that he would be pleased to publish the book at the author's expense, the outlay required being twenty-five pounds. For a while the poet's head was a-whirl. He would have no difficulty, he believed, in collecting the money for such a grand purpose. He wrote six letters to six famous philanthropists, explaining the circumstances. But four curt letters from four secretaries, and silence in the remaining cases, were all the response he received.

Nevertheless, he did not give up. By living more sparingly still, at cheaper lodging-houses in the Borough and other districts across the bridges, he managed to save a little money, and his next step was to write three or four short poems on a page, get them printed, and sell them from door to door. A fortnight's privation and sacrifice enabled him to make up the sum of thirty-five shillings, which was demanded by a jobbing printer, and he received in return two thousand copies of the printed sheet. Early the next morning he

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was to be seen in the suburbs of London, with his hands and pockets full of these copies, and he mentioned at every house he visited that he had an offer from a publisher, and that the publisher could not undertake to publish a volume of poems under twenty-five pounds. All the people did was to stare, none of them seeming to understand and no one showed any inclination to ask questions. The total result of visiting thirty houses or more was not a single sale. Eventually he became so disgusted that he put the sheets back into his pockets and returned to the city. How long would it take at this rate, he asked himself, to get twenty-five pounds? What was he thinking about?

When he got back to the house he started, "with the fury of a madman," to burn the printed sheets and did not rest until they were all destroyed, taking care not to save one copy that would at any time remind him of his folly!

So the sequel to that disaster in the Canadian snows moved onward: so ended a crippled poet's first abortive attempt at the conquest of London. He was more determined than ever to succeed in his conquest, but the old spirit to wander seized him again, and he made up his mind to travel through England. He would hawk laces, needles, pins, buttons, starting with a light heart and not too heavy a load, and going on until he was worth

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the money that it would cost to have his poems published in a volume.

v

That " old spirit to wander " was his inheritance. It might have been inherited from his father, but he could never be sure—indeed his memory of his father as a man was wholly vague, as he puts on record in a beautifully tender poem in the volume " A Poet's Alphabet " :

All I remember is a coat
Of velvet, buttoned on his breast;
Where I, when tired off fingering it,
Would lay my childish head and rest.

His voice was low and seldom heard,
His body small—I've heard it said;
But his hoarse cough made children think
Of monsters growling to be fed.

" They whispered, ' Hist! Away, away—there's some big giant lives in there ! ' " . . . It is more certain that his wandering predecessor was a grandfather, native of Cornwall, " whose pride it was, drunk or sober, to inform all strangers that he had been master of his own ship, the said ship being a small schooner."

This grandfather kept a tavern called the Church House, in the town of Newport, in the county of Monmouthshire, and William Henry Davies was born there on April 20th, 1871. He had been

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unable to review his early environment with unalloyed satisfaction, for it was through being born in a public-house that he became acquainted with the taste of drink at a very early age, "receiving sups of mulled beer at bed-time, in lieu of cocoa or tea, as is the custom in more domestic houses." Nevertheless, although the consequence was that later on he was easily induced to drink, he remembered his first years happily, for his grandparents retired into private life and, because Will Davies's mother married again, adopted their fatherless grandchildren.

Thus they settled down, and the home consisted of "grandfather, grandmother, an imbecile brother, a sister, myself, a maidservant, a dog, a cat, a parrot, a dove, and a canary bird." Everybody in Newport knew that the brother was odd in his behaviour, but the old grandfather steadfastly refused to believe that he was different from other boys even though the differences were flagrant. There was an occasion on which the grandmother asked him to watch some fish that was being prepared for dinner. "When she returned, the cat was enjoying a good meal under the sofa. To the old lady's cry of * Francis, did I not tell you to watch the fish?' my brother answered truthfully: for he always told the truth and did what he was told—^c So I did, grandmother, and the cat took it/ "

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The irony of this brother's existence was not unobserved by the younger boy. Twenty years later he emphasized it in verses entitled "The Idiot and the Child," which records that "when others wept this idiot laughed, when others laughed he then would weep," and when "death came that way" and "breathed upon a child" the idiot "chuckled hard," and the idiot's mother, who loved him, and was only the grandparent of the dead child, "looked at that child dead, and then at him she loved; * Ah well; thank God it is no worse!" she said." Many another poem that he was to write throws light upon those early days. In one entitled "The Child and the Mariner," to be found in "Songs of Joy," he paid tribute to the old people into whose ears he often wished, after they were dead, he could speak "the gratitude which was due to them in life and so ill returned."

A dear old couple my grandparents were,
And kind to all dumb things; they saw in Heaven
The lamb that Jesus petted when a child;
Their faith was never draped by Doubt; to them
Death was a rainbow in Eternity,
That promised everlasting brightness soon.

"In our street," he has written in his autobiography, "almost every woman had some one connected with the sea, and it was my grandfather's pleasure by day to parade the street and inform the

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women as to what winds and tides were favourable to their husbands or sons." This pleasant habit is commemorated in verse:

An old seafaring man was he ; a rough
Old man, but kind : and hairy, like the nut
Full of sweet milk. All day on shore he watched
The winds for sailors' wives, and told what ships
Enjoyed fair weather, and what ships had storms ;
He watched the sky, and he could tell for sure
What afternoons would follow stormy morns,
If quiet nights would end wild afternoons.

He was a man, the poem goes on to say, who " leapt away from scandal with a roar," and when a beggar passed he " took offence at Heaven," sternly calling the wretch back to give him help. As a grandfather and guardian he was generous. " My first ambition," declares his grandson, " was to be an artist. He supplied me with crayons. I was so greatly encouraged by him that after a time our neighbours thought it worth while to give me sixpence for a drawing and have it framed. Maybe those Davies pictures are hanging on the walls of Newport houses to this day."

The home in which the boy Will Davies was brought up seems the perfect setting for a retired mariner. Things it contained had been " in ships' cabins once " :

Sea-shells and charts and pebbles, model ships;
Green weeds, dried fishes stuffed, and coral stalks ;

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Old wooden trunks with handles of spliced rope,
With copper saucers full of monies strange,
That seemed the savings of dead men, not touched
To keep them warm since their real owners died;
Strings of red beads, methought were dipped in blood,
And swinging lamps, as though the house might move;
An ivory lighthouse built on ivory rocks,
The bones of fishes and three botded ships.
And many a thing was there which sailors make
In idle hours, when on long voyages,
Of marvellous patience, to no lovely end.

A stranger came to the house, " the old man's nephew, a seafarer too." He was a big strong able man, " so strong he could have made one man his club to knock down others." He was ill-clad, " but oh, thought I, what secrets of the sea are his ! "

And so he talked

Nor did those people listen with more awe
To Lazaras—whom they had seen stone-dead—
Than did we urchins to that seaman's voice.

Many a tale of wonder the seaman told. " Oh, it was sweet to hear him tell such wondrous tales ! " There is no mystery, surely, about the restlessness and indeed recklessness that overcame the young Will Davies as he grew older. He began by playing truant from school, and then he organized a band of " robbers "—" six in number, and all of good families and comfortable homes"—who systematically pilfered from shops, so that " my

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girl, Maggie," who had, during their early acquaintance, received only presents of wild flowers and birds' eggs, and occasionally a handful of nuts," was now the happy possessor of valuable presents in the shape of purses, pocket-books, bottles of scent, pencils of silver, not to mention having received a hundred different sorts of sweets, and cake that was superior to her mother's."

Retribution awaited him in the shape of a police cell and twelve strokes with the birch-rod. . . . And when his grandparents were dead, and he learned that the "good old soul," his grandmother, had left the estate in the hands of a trustee, its profits to be divided between the three grandchildren, he threw up the picture-frame making at which he had served his apprenticeship, and then, as a young man of twenty-two, persuaded the aforesaid trustee to advance him fifteen pounds for his passage to America.

Two trips he made to America. Once he returned home as a cattleman and, following the same occupation, went back again. He beheld such cruelty on board the ship that carried 750 head of cattle and two thousand head of sheep from Baltimore to Liverpool that he afterwards declared in verse that he would rather see a battle than "a dumb thing near a drunken man." He also asked, poignantly, in a poem entitled "The Ox":

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Why should I pause, poor beast, to praise
Thy back so red, thy sides so white;
And on thy brow those curls in which
Thy mournful eyes take no delight?

I dare not make fast friends with kine,
Nor sheep, nor fowl that cannot fly;
For they live not for Nature's voice,
Since 'tis man's will when they must die.

So, if I call thee some pet name,
And give thee of my care to-day
Where wilt thou be tomorrow morn
When I turn curious eyes thy way ?

... So take away those great sad eyes
That stare across yon fence at me.

But life aboard was not all summed up in the lines—

I cannot see the short white curls
Upon the forehead of an Ox,
But what I see them dripping with
That poor thing's blood, and hear the axe—

for he had a shipmate who kept a parrot, and that he did not fail to appreciate the cheerier aspects of sea-life is shown by the verses in which the sailor addresses the bird :

Thou foul-mouthed wretch! Why dost thou choose
To learn bad language, and no good;
Canst thou not say " The Lord be praised "
A« easy as " Hell's fire and blood " ?

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Why didst thou call the gende priest
A thief and a damned rogue; and tell
The deacon's wife, who came to pray,
To hold her jaw, and go to hell?

VI

The old spirit to wander was his inheritance. So was the desire to read and write. A distant relative on his grandmother's side had, long ago, "gone on the stage, and was causing some stir under a different name from his own, which was Brodribb." Moreover, in addition to the subtle influence from afar of this Brodribb, whom the world knew as Henry Irving, there was the influence, not at all subtle, of one who rubbed shoulders with young Davies at school: a boy companion, named Dave, who was a great reader and had so much self-confidence that he was always chosen at Sunday school to recite at concerts. . . . Through him Will Davies forgot his ambition to be a painter and became a reader, with an idea of emulating his cleverness, which led to a love of literature for its own sake. When he left school and, after a period of employment with an ironmonger at a weekly wage of five shillings, was bound apprentice to the picture-frame trade, his passion for reading easily outrivalled his lukewarm attempt to apply himself to business. "The fact of the matter was that I was reading deep into

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the night and, having to be up early for work, was encroaching on Nature's allowance of sleep." Even at that early stage he composed and caused to be printed a poem describing a storm at night, which a young friend recited at a mutual improvement class, mentioning the author's name.

"What a tremendous struggle for utterance these lines represent," is his private reflection to-day. "Even now I don't know what to make of them. All I know is that I walked about for two whole weeks and recited them, and the rest of the poem, to myself. The lines haunted me. . . . To think I wrote that ambitious piece at fourteen and then the simple little poems I have written since, such as—

**Oh happy wind, how sweet
Thy life must be !
The great proud fields of gold
Run after thee :
And here are flowers, with heads
To nod and shake;
And dreaming butterflies
To tease and wake,
Oh, happy wind, I say,
To be alive this day."**

When the father of his friend Dave, an iron-founder, was shown the first products of his immaturity, he exclaimed : "This boy Davies is a genius ! " And indeed the boy Davies " showed at this time some parts that made older and wiser

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people of both sexes prophesy good results in manhood." They would have shaken their heads, though, if they could have seen him setting out from that lodging-house in the Borough, reverting to vagabondage with his stock of laces, needles, pins and buttons, and, after many humiliations dealt him by the charitable organization which supplied it, a new wooden leg, " of the common peg sort that would be more useful for such a knockabout life." For a young fellow to sow his wild oats in that wonderful, far-away country across the Atlantic was not so bad : but to be a tramping pedlar in England!—that was another matter. How could the people down at home know that he was now a different man from the crude, harum-scarum vagabond who had roamed the United States and Canada, and whose main outlook on life is conveyed in the snatch of song which the beggars were to sing in chorus later on in a " tramps* opera," written by him, and entitled " True Travellers ":

**Good people keep their holy day,
They rest from labour on a Sunday ;
But we keep holy every day
And rest from Monday until Monday.**

A very different man, indeed. He had cultivated his mind not a little by the reading of " standard works " and, equipped with his vision of the future and the peace of present objects, also with

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nine shillings in his pocket, he set out on a beautiful morning the first green field, " the first bird that differed from the sparrow," the first stile in the hedge, and " the first footpath across the wild common that was neither of gravel nor ash." " Reaching St. Albans on the first night, I walked through that town, and, making a pillow of my pack, lay down on the wild common. It seemed as though extra bodies of stars had been drafted that night into the heavens to guard and honour the coming of age of a beautiful moon." He adds that this fine scene kept him awake for two or three hours, in spite of tired limbs. . . . That moonlight night outside St. Albans was memorialized in verse very soon afterwards:

All day walked I, and that same night I scorned
The shelter of a house, lay peaceful down
Beneath the glorious stars : beneath that nest
Of singing stars men call the Milky Way ;
. . . I was alone : had left the Borough in
Safe care of my old cronies, who would keep
Its reputation from becoming changed
Into a quiet neighbourhood.

And in him that night, and the nights that followed, was sown the seed of a poem which he was to complete in the years of his maturity—a poem about the moon and its beauty, and the greatness of those who had worshipped the moon :

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Thy beauty haunts me heart and soul,
Oh thou fair Moon, so close and bright;
Thy beauty makes me like the child
That cries aloud to own thy light;
The little child that lifts each arm,
To press thee to her bosom warm.

Though there are birds that sing this night
With thy white beams across their throats,
Let my deep silence speak for me
More than for them their sweetest notes :
Who worship thee till music fails
Is greater than thy nightingales.

Here, stumping on a wooden leg towards the English midlands, with laces and needles, pins and buttons, was a common tramp no longer* Here was the tramp-royal that Jack London had aspired to be, ten years earlier, on a similar adventure : not merely a "blowed-in-the-glass hobo," as they called them in the America he had left for ever, but rather the super-tramp, able to write of the life he lived—of Nature, of humanity, of the wild country, the birds, supremely the birds that sang at night with the moon's white beams across their throats: one whom the coming years were to prove as belonging, in his own unique way, to the direct line of the sons of God, who, while the morning stars shouted together, sang for joy.

Chapter II

Revolutionary

i

FOUR months on the roads of England were enough for the super-tramp: four months of hardship and humiliation, cheered now and then by petty triumphs at the expense of stingy housewives on their own thresholds and also at the expense of the agents of the law in the highways and byways : ups and downs which reduced him to such a low state of health and spirit that, to his surprise, he began to look forward with pleasure to be again frequenting the old haunts in London, for which, when leaving them, he felt so much disgust.

" This feeling," he has since reflected, " seems to be natural: that I felt inclined to see familiar faces, although they were red and blotchy with drink : to hear familiar voices, however foul their language might be," There was also another cause of his reluctance to continue in his daily task of avoiding the extremes of poverty. " What-

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ever luck I had, good or bad," he recollects, " I always managed to escape the workhouse; **and** was determined to walk all night, if needs be, rather than seek refuge in one of those places." . • •

When he became his own biographer he described a momentous day at Stratford-on-Avon:—" I wandered alone about the town, and as I went here and there in this enchanted place, ambition again took possession of me, stronger than ever. It filled me with vexation to think that I was no nearer my object, for I was, practically speaking, penniless. Two months had I wandered, during which time I had not been able to concentrate my thoughts on any noble theme, taking all day to procure the price of a bed, and two or three coppers over for food. True, I had by now some three pounds saved, the income that I had not touched, but at this rate I would never be able to attain my ends. November was here, and I was suddenly confronted with a long winter before me, and I pictured myself starving and snowbound in a small, out-of-the-way village, or mercilessly pelted by hailstones on a wild, shelterless heath. Side by side with these scenes I placed my ideal, which was a small room with a cosy fire, in which I sat surrounded by books."

Many are the poems in which he recollected the ambition outlined so simply at the end of this wistful passage. " Truly great " he felt

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the achievement of such an ideal would make him:

My walls outside must have some flowers,
My walls within must have some books;
A house that's small; a garden large,
And in it leafy nooks.

A litde gold that's sure each week;
That comes not from my living kind,
But from a dead man in his grave,
Who cannot change his mind.

"A lovely wife," he continues, "and gentle too"; and then:

With this small house, this garden large,
This little gold, this lovely mate,
With health in body, peace at heart—
Show me a man more great.

Not yet was he more than dimly aware of it, but deep in his mind another ambition was stirring, that also found, eventually, its expression in song:

Give me the poet's life divine,
For ever fresh and young;
The only hours that vex his soul
Are hours that give no song;
If he but can,
A homeless man,
Turn suffering into songs divine—
That poet's life is still divine,
His life is still divine.

Can it not be said, moreover, that, far from wasting his time on this spell of vagabondage that was

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almost the last he ever undertook, William Henry Davies, with the poet's quick vision, the capacity to store up impressions that were being received and accepted in an uncannily individual fashion, was adding the necessary preliminaries to a career which ere long had earned not only the admiring plaudits of his contemporaries, writers as well as readers, but State recognition in the shape of a pension ?

All creation enriched his gift; Nature and human nature alike were, to him, as the wind that ripples along the strings of a harp. The rogues and vagabonds he hailed and companioned on the highways and byways and in the lodging-houses were to have a place in his writings : the birds and beasts, even the tiniest of them, became not simply the substance of his lyrics—he transfigured them; they are notes of music, they are song itself. No other poet has had such singing fancies : " What shall we call thee—mouse o' the air ?" . . . this splendidly complete comparison for the sparrow must have occurred to his quick observant eye as he trudged from village to village. " Here are butterflies "—

and when they rest

They cannot help but ope and close

Their wings like babies with their toes.

The man who came limping past the infant's cot on the garden-path, was not merely what the village housewife thought of him as she bought his

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laces or turned him away from the door. . . .
And while he rested at the wayside in the hot
afternoon his eyes were still alert:

Now let my bed be hard,
No care take I:
I'll make my joy like this
Small butterfly:
Whose happy heart has power
To make a stone a flower.

When the rain came and he sheltered under trees :

I hear leaves drinking rain:
I hear rich leaves on top
Giving the poor beneath
Drop after drop.

He would lie deep in the grass at noonday and,
gazing upward, follow the ascent of the skylark •

Is it that small black star
Twinkling in broad daylight,
Upon the bosom of
Yon cloud so white—
Is it that small black thing
Makes earth and all Heaven ring ? . . .

" My love of Nature was terrific. Even Wordsworth couldn't have felt it as I did. The birds were my friends. I talked to the cows over the fence—and to the horses and sheep. I could almost kiss the earth in my affection for it." He expressed that love of Nature in countless delicious manifestations very soon after his tramping days were over. Also his memories and impressions

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came to die aid of the Muse for many years to come. And as it was with Nature, so with human nature. He peopled his memory with the ragged men and women who, added to his American gallery, were to enrich the great English literature of vagabondage. Snatches of conversation, chat and back-chat, the motley figures at the lodging-house fire, the very names and nicknames contributed to his store. In "Saints and Lodgers" he catalogues these nicknames with droll gusto :

Ye saints, that sing in rooms above,
Do ye want souls to consecrate ?
Here's " Boosy " Bob, " Pease Pudding " Joe,
And " Fishy Fat," of Billingsgate.

Other verses begin: " Here's Sporting Fred," and " Here's Brummy Tom," and " Here's Irish Tim," and then:

Ye saints above, come to these sinners :
To " Sunny " James and " Skilly " Bob,
" The Major," " Dodger," " Tinker " George,
And " Deafy," he's the lodgers' snob—

and " many more to consecrate " : " Haymaker George," " Australian Bill," " Balmy Joe," and " Slim," " a quiet man awake, whose sleep's a twenty horse-power snore"—all these " toy-sellers, fishmen, paper-men . . . cadgers," " consecrate, if, Christian folk, ye think worth while."

The poem is not exhaustive. Others come to

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life again in other poems, and in the prose writings! There were "Monkey Sam" and the "Dodger," two who had such mutual sympathy and understanding that when the body of one of them itched the other could, without seeing his friend make the least motion, scratch his own body in the exact place.

Then there was the prototype of "Snivelling Tom" in whom he found the gem of a confession recorded in "True Travellers." "I had scarcely finished my hymn," said Snivelling Tom, "when a kind lady came to the door and beckoned me to come across. * My poor fellow,' she said, 'here is sixpence and a parcel of food, for I can tell by the way you sing that life is uncertain for you. Please don't sing any more, for I feel sure that you suffer almost as much pain yourself as you give to others.'" There was also the "Professor," who offered a woman-tramp a definition of a bishop and of a curate: "Madam, the difference in their dress would probably be too fine for your apprehension: but a Bishop, Madam, usually has a redder nose and a larger belly than a curate."

This "Professor," or his original, appears to have made a profound impression on the author of "True Travellers." When that "tramps' opera" came to be written and he was re-created, and his cunning exploitation of human weaknesses exploited in its turn, he was the life and soul of it:

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"Enter COLONEL (they both salute him).

PROFESSOR. Sir, may we have a word with you, as two old soldiers ?

COLONEL (aside). Two old soldiers, eh: and is that the way they salute? (To them.) Stand at ease! Shoulder arms ! Eyes to the front! Right turn ! Quick march ! (They are utterly confused.) Two old soldiers, are you ? You are two damn scoundrels!

PROFESSOR. Sir, you are too keen for us. If every officer had your penetration, the British Army would never lose a battle."

A youth also enters the scene, and the Professor begs a copper or two towards a shelter for the night:

YOUTH. Twopence is all the change I have.

PROFESSOR. For that, Sir, I shall be deeply grateful. And when I lie in bed to-night, Sir, I shall say to myself—^c To-day I met as fine a man as ever broke bread or breathed the breath of life.* Sir, it is not often that I meet a man like you.

(Exit YOUTH, swaggering)."

It is this same Professor who lifts the fireside debates in the lodging-house to a lofty plane:

"PROFESSOR. AS I was saying just now, gentlemen, that, although genius is said to be

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born, and not made, yet, believe me, it is quite possible to make it.

DICK. DO you mean to say, Professor, that it would be possible to make a child a second Shakespeare, a Beethoven or a Napoleon ?

PROFESSOR. Yes, Sir, any child that underwent the proper experiments.

RALPH. Would it make any difference if it was a lovechild or an orphan ?

PROFESSOR. NO difference in the least, Sir.

POLL. Could it be done with *my* baby, Professor ?

PROFESSOR. Yes, Madam, if you will listen carefully to what I say. In the first place, I would cut off its two arms, and—as soon as the child was strong enough to bear a second operation—I would cut off its two legs. The body then, having lost four greedy members, would be able to feed the brain to such an extent that the child's mental vitality would be abnormal.

POLL. Would you do that to *my* child, you inhuman brute ?

PROFESSOR. I beg your pardon, Madam, for mentioning a matter of this kind. I ought to have known that all women are against progress, as they have always been."

The Professor's power of repartee apparently

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stimulated that of the super-tramp, for Davies wrote later on:

When I this morn did beg a rich man's house,
" Go to the bees, thou sluggard "—he replied.
" And to the devil, you " — I answered him.

II

Back in London, he found lodgings at the Farmhouse, Marshalsea Road, The Borough. The Farmhouse was a more select place than the Ark, at which he had lodged during his previous sojourn in London. " A strange house, so full of quaint characters. Some of these had been here for fifteen and twenty years." An Irishman and his wife were the managers. " He, with a generous heart that always kept him poor. . . . She, more circumspect, but kind-hearted and motherly, . . ." This manager was drawn by chance into his confidence about his literary ambitions. " I must have been in this house something like twelve months, when I took a sudden notion to send some work to a literary man, asking him for his opinion of the same. In a few days I received a letter stating that want of time prevented him from passing judgment on my work, which he regretted he would have to return unread." Lest innocent literary men should be suspected of this failure to perceive the promise of a new poet, it is now possible to name him as the late Clement K. Shorter.

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Unfortunately, the manuscript came back to its owner in such a condition that the lodging-house manager (who, with his wife, is commemorated in " True Travellers ") could not help seeing what the parcel contained. Sharing the secret, he proved to be of great encouragement. " You will always find room at the Farmhouse/' he assured the poet when he eventually took to the road again with the deliberate purpose, on this occasion, of saving the money he would otherwise spend on lodgings. He had obtained the assurance of his trustee, moreover, that the money to pay for the printing of his poems would be made up if at the end of the next six months he could show that he had saved ten pounds.

"Again I was leaving London, not knowing how much I would have to suffer. One idea consoled me not a little : that I would not require any money for a bed for at least three months to come; that the nights, though cold, would not be so dangerous as to kill. Whatever the consequences might be, even if this rough life threatened to injure my health permanently, I was firmly resolved to sacrifice the next six months for whatever might follow them."

Mr. George Bernard Shaw has related the sequel. " In the year 1905 I received by post a volume of poems by one William H. Davies, whose address was The Farmhouse, Kennington, S.E. I was

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surprised to learn that there was still a farmhouse left in Kennington: for I did not then suspect **that** the Farmhouse, like the Shepherdess Walks and Nightingale Lanes and Whetstone Parks of Bethnal Green and Holborn, is so called nowadays in irony, and is, in fact, a dosshouse, or hostelry where single men can have a night's lodging for, **at** most, sixpence.

". . . When Mr. Davies's book came to hand my imagination failed me. I could not place him. There were no author's compliments, no publisher's compliments, indeed no publisher in the ordinary channel of the trade in minor poetry. The author, so far as I could guess, had walked into a printer's of stationer's shop, handed in his manuscript, and ordered his book as he might have ordered a pair of boots. It was marked 'price half a crown.' An accompanying letter asked me very civilly if I required a half-crown book of verses: and if so, would I please send the author the half-crown: if not, would I return the book.

" I opened the book, and was more puzzled than ever: for before I had read three lines I perceived that the author was a real poet. His work was not in the least strenuous or modern: there was in it no sign that he had ever read anything later than Cowper or Crabbe, not even Byron, Shelley, or Keats, much less Morris, Swinburne, Tennyson, or Henley and Kipling. There was indeed no

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sign of his ever having read anything otherwise than as a child reads. The result was a freedom from literary vulgarity which was like a draught of clear water in a desert. . . . So . . . I bought some spare copies, and told him to send them to such critics and verse fanciers as he knew of, wondering whether they would recognize a poet when they met one."

And, adds Mr. Shaw, they actually did. Edward Thomas, Israel Zangwill, St. John Adcock, and Mr. Edward Garnett are some whose praise helped the new poet to forget the most recent of his humiliations, one which had been imposed on him by the metropolitan charitable organizations, to whom a doubtless well-meaning person had passed on the letter with which W. H. Davies had accompanied his little book. Inviting him to appear before them they asked such questions as: "Do you ever do anything for a living?" and: "Mr. Davies, do you really expect this gentleman, who has written to us, to maintain you?" It was the interference of this charity organization that had stung him into sending out further copies of the book. The success which attended his action "was all like a dream. I had not expected such an amount of praise, and they gathered in favour as they came, until one wave came stronger than the others and threw me breathless of all conceit, for I felt myself unworthy of it, and of the wonderful

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sea on which I had embarked." True, as **one** writer remarked cynically : " He was praised and photographed as a wooden-legged poet in the daily press for some weeks and then forgotten." But neither that nor the fact that the discovery of him brought him no fortune affected the real appreciation. Edward Thomas, who was at this period a critic of influence, declared in print that " * The Soul's Destroyer' contains some of the most beautiful and poignant poetry of our day." St. John Adcock, of " The Bookman," added that the little book " contained a hundred lines that have not been excelled in our generation." Perhaps the most comprehensive tribute was paid by another influential critic, whose words comprised a snapshot of the poet himself at this momentous time: " A child-like tramp who has picked up perfect wild flowers of poetry by the roadside, and when the world told him what they were he accepted it all in a sort of happy bewilderment, always wondering, as they say on the road, ' where the catch is/ "

III

" Childlike " in one sense only was the author of " The Soul's Destroyer." In another sense he is more adequately described as a revolutionary poet, and this is how he must be regarded in his first phase, which eventually, and inevitably for him,

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merged into the second phase, that of Nature poetry. Now that readers have acquainted themselves with the details of W. H. Davies's early history they will be well-advised not to linger overlong on the circumstance that he was (in the phrase of the aforesaid cynic) a "one-legged poet." The reason why this received so much emphasis at the discovery of Davies is that publishers were fond in those days of catch-penny designations: they sought to sell the minor verse volumes of the period by referring to the authors as "cobbler poet," "bank-clerk poet," and so on. (Actually in the British Museum catalogue, W. H. Davies's early works were referred to as by "The Tramp Poet," but this has since been crossed out.) The nature of his upbringing is only of importance in the sense that it "was valuable to know of John Keats that he began amid *plasters, pills, and ointment boxes, etc.," and that Percy Bysshe Shelley was the son of a boor who, if he had been asked to bestow relative values on the ingredients of Omar Khayydm's couplet about "a book of verses underneath the bough, a flask of wine . . . and thou," would certainly not have put the book of verses first. The subsequent career of W. H. Davies has been one of steady development, and it quickly became unimportant, in a comparative way, that he once tramped across two countries: indeed we are inclined to regard it as hardly more

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significant than it was, ultimately, that William Shakespeare had little "Lattin" and less Greek. Each of the phases that emerged from that early experience, and which are registered by his revolutionary poetry and Nature poetry, has, however, left its imperishable record, and "The Soul's Destroyer" is worth lingering over not simply as Davies's first book but as a contribution to the literature of revolt.

It is a unique contribution. Neither Shelley, Swinburne, nor William Morris, earlier revolutionaries in poetry, were intimate with the causes of revolt in the way that Davies has been intimate. Like George Borrow, by comparison with Davies the tramp, so, by comparison with Davies as a witness of scenes which moved him to indignation, they were amateurs. Amateurs, that is, in the sense that George Bernard Shaw confessed himself an amateur in Davies's presence. He, the Socialist, exclaimed: "How much did I know of hotels until I read this book! I have often wondered how the poor travel; for it is plain that the Ritzes and Metropoles, and even the hotels noted by Baedeker as 'unpretending,' are not for them. Where does the man with sixpence in his pocket stay? Mr. Davies knows. Read and learn. . . . Mr. Davies is no propagandist of the illusion of the middle-class tramp fancier(I). You never suspect him of having read 'Lavengro,' or got his

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notions of nomads from Mr. Theodore Watts-Dunton."

It is for this reason that "The Lodging-House Fire" in W. H. Davies's first book of verse is one of the finest retrospective meditations in the language. This is the poem that especially drew the attention of those into whose hands the volume came. It reveals an extraordinary understanding and sympathy. It is written by one who is still to be assumed an inmate of the lodging-house. Indeed he has just passed a birthday, and it is his feeling of regret for a wasted occasion that he expresses in these simply-written, half-rhymed seventeen stanzas. Poets more accomplished than he have been brought to grief by their attempts to poetize numerals, but he avoids bathos admirably.

**My birthday—yesterday,
Its hours were twenty-four;
Four hours I lived lukewarm,
And killed a score.**

**Eight bells and then I woke,
Came to our fire below,
Then sat four hours and watched
Its sullen glow.**

**Then out four hours I walked,
The lukewarm four I live,
And felt no other joy
Than air can give.**

The strange and wasteful fascination of the red-

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coke fire for thirty men is the theme. They were helpless to move away from that fire's warmth, and when they were obliged to leave it they went back as soon as possible. The poet speaks of its " death-dealing glow " and of men being carried dead away from it, and he is writing of actuality, for in his prose he returned to the theme and wrote : " There was one seat at the corner of the table which I have heard called ^c the dead man's seat/ It was within two yards of this great fire, which was never allowed to suffer from want of coke. It was impossible to retain this seat long and keep awake. Of course a man could hardly expect to keep this seat day after day for a long winter, and be alive in the spring of the year." He went on to speak of a printer who worked only three days a week and having earned enough to keep him, occupied the seat for the other four days, " eating, reading, but more often sleeping." Before the winter ended he was carried away a dying man. The note of rebellion against social conditions that make the common lodging-house a necessity, and force into it men worthy of better things: this poem sounds it, subtle, yet unmistakable. The same note is in others also, notably " Sleep " :

**Thou makest war to cease
Awhile, and armies pause;
And in the midst of strife
Thou bringest them to peace:**

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**The tyrant must delay
The cruel deed at thy command;
Oppressed ones know thy balm
Can take their fears away.**

Linked to the note of rebellion in "The Lodging-House Fire" there is the more personal note of social frustration. They are both conveyed with a greater vividness than elsewhere in another poem "In a Lodging-House/* which is poignantly wistful in its yearning for things out of reach. The sweet voice of a woman "none others know as those to whom thou'rt seldom heard ": those

**Who have no flower to tend, no bird
For pet, no child to play—to give
A cultured joy to ones that live
In common lodging-house. To hear
A sweet voice is to me more dear
Than sound of organs, bands, or bells.**

Rebellion, frustration: these, and a groping towards a new life, are in the title-poem of the volume, one of the most ambitious the author was ever to compose. "The SouPs Destroyer" contains three hundred and fifty-seven lines of blank verse. The argument is autobiographical in flashes. London is a city so great that she has lovers who are faithful to every mood. But London has her dark secret, the slums that none can love, although here, more than anywhere else,

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there is need of love. In this city, for " full five years " the poet dwelt; he knew through and through the London of poverty and intemperance—the " soul's destroyer."

Hopeless he had become, " a wreck of man, a derelict that neither sinks nor floats.*' Often, however, had he thought with " sweet remembrance " of his early years, when, far from London, " lived one, now to another wed," who had been his playfellow in childhood and whose presence he recalled as "a pool of deep repose." And now, in a state of such sottishness " as though no beauty was in all the world," he conceived a wish to escape London and look again upon that woman. So one morning, awaking with lips gone dry, and muddled in his senses, he sought Nature's air, and the " sunny sky, green fields, and water's sound." All day he walked, and at night " lay peaceful down beneath the glorious stars." Eventually he approached his home. All the old scenes were there unchanged. But his courage failed. " I feared to see in life her who was now the heroine of dreams." He entered an inn to seek " courage " and there he encountered the man " who had wed my love"—a drunkard, so far gone in his drunkenness that hope had gone also. He accompanied him home. But (and in this quotation are the only lines that suggest bathos) although at the door of the drunkard's home—

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three little Apriks played,
Three little children, litle Apriks all,
So full were they of Apriks strife and love ;
Who, when they saw us coming, ran to meet us,
To make a bridal entry with their laughter,

it was, nevertheless, a place of tragedy. The
" sweet familiar " of other days had loved mis-
takenly, and

she had loved without avail.

Hers was a widowhood in which death had claimed
no part—until that night, when the drunkard died
in his madness. " Such is the drink that fathers
half our sins "—

This curse of drink, in village and in town,
The curse of nations, their decline and fall,
Ere they can question purpose of this life ;
And so 'twill be until the mind is reared
To see the beauty that is in the world
Of Science, Art, and Nature at all times ;
To know that temperance and sobriety
Is truer joy—even though the grave ends all—
Than an unnatural merriment that brings
A thousand tortures for its hundred joys.

" The Soul's Destroyer " is uneven, disproportion-
ate, and sometimes roughly finished—as when
" bounds " succeeds " sounds " at the end of
blank-verse lines, where, of course, the faintest
suggestion of rhyme needs to be meticulously
avoided. But the poem has passages so remarkable

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that they suggest the grand manner, notably that in which the writer speaks of

**proud Autumn in more gold arrayed
Ere cold October strips and blows him bare,
Than ever delved from earth or ta'en from water's wash ;**

and another describing a man's divided love of London and Nature:

**His heart is as a mother's, that can hear
Voices of absent children o'er the sea
Calling to her, and children's words at home.**

Although the author has since written lengthy poems with the surer hand of maturity, "The Soul's Destroyer" achieves its own effect decisively: not only by its palpable sincerity, but by a forthright method that, paradoxically, fails during the few moments in which the poet is conscious of being a poet and feels the necessity of poeticizing:

**As some lone hunter might at sunrise see
Upon the margent of a woodland pool. . . .**

The self-consciousness of this passage is accentuated by the word "margent," which is used elsewhere in the volume also, and just as much out of place—it would be out of place in any poem by W. H. Davies. It is hard to believe that the lines came from the same hand that had just written, in the same poem:

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Yon lord or squire in his great house,
Who himself busies guessing all his days
The age of horses and the weight of hogs,
The breed of hounds—not such as he has held
The ear to Nature's quiet heart-beat. No ;
He overlooks the flower to spy the fox,
Ignores *the* lark's song for the halloing horn
Nor hears the echo of that horn he loves—
Not such as he is rich in Nature's stores.

At that early stage Davies saw the world with naive surprise, which in a different fashion characterized the verse of such great predecessors as Campion and Herrick : but he had not yet gained the technical grip that is shown from start to finish of Campion's lyric about the garden in a woman's face " where roses and white lilies blow," and cherries that enclose a double row of orient pearls which neither " peer nor prince can buy till * Cherry-ripe ' themselves do cry " : shown also in Herrick's lines on the same theme, the ripe cherries now growing " where my Julia's lips do smile." When Davies wrote of Nature he employed little or no imagery; but his salute to the sparrow as " mouse o' the air" is an indication of what originality was pent up in him, ready to break forth as soon as he put aside the hesitation that was inevitable in a poet whose Muse is nourished amid surroundings which never fail to remind him of his inferiority. " The Soul's Destroyer " is a prelude to the unloosing of the flood of his heart's

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native utterance, a prelude to the time that followed swiftly, when song poured from his lips as readily as speech.

IV

The demand for "The Soul's Destroyer" was sufficient to cause the book in its early form to go out of print, and while a new edition was being prepared by one of the recognized London publishing houses, that of Alston Rivers, the second of W. H. Davies's works was issued by Elkin Matthews under the simple title "New Poems." It is in this collection that the poet's preoccupation with country instead of town, his change of mood from revolt to contentment, becomes palpable. We might almost say that he who was so like William Blake in many ways now became a topsyturvy Blake, for his poems of experience precede his poems of innocence. Soon he was to blend innocence and experience in a way that can only be described as one of sublimation, and already, in "The Soul's Destroyer" and "New Poems" alike, there are intimations of it.

**We went together side by side to school,
Together had our holidays in fields
Made golden by June's buttercups; in woods,
Where under ferns fresh pulled I buried her,
And called her forth like La2arus from the grave;
She'd laughing come, to shake her curls until
Methought to hear full half a hundred bells.**

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A grown-up world took playful notice soon
Made me feel shame that grew a greater love;
She was more chary of her laughter then,
And more subdued her voice, as soft and sweet
As Autumn's, blowing through his golden reeds.
In her sweet sympathies she was a woman
When scarcely she was more than child in years;
And yet one angry moment parted us,
And days of longing never joined us more.

The blend of innocence and experience in this passage, taken from "The Soul's Destroyer" itself, is Wordsworthian. And in "New Poems" a score of lines may be added from a piece entitled "The Forsaken Dead" to indicate how he suggests the not immature Shelley:

Some other tyrant, in some other shire,
Will drive his people forth, and they will come
Hither, to be this other tyrant's slaves.
Then back, ye famished strangers, or haste on:
There is no joy here, save in one short change;
Be warned to see these dead forsaken here.
Had they no dreamer here who might remain
To sing for them these desolated scenes?
One who might on a starved body take
Strong flights beyond the fiery larks in song,
With awful music, passionate with hate?
Were I that bard, and that poor people mine,
I would make strangers curse that tyrant's day:
Would call on Sleep, compeller of strange dreams,
Who leads the unbeliever to the Heaven he doubts,
And makes a false one fear the Hell he scorns—
Would call on Sleep to bring him ghastly dreams,
And haunt that tyrant's night without repose.

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Many of the poems in this second book reveal uncomplicated the same naive, pristine outlook that in the main characterized "The Soul's Destroyer." His images and ideas were as new as though he had resolutely determined to reject any that might seem like echoes. There was, of course, none of this deliberateness apparent in them. On the other hand, they were the spontaneous utterance of one who, himself as elemental as any tree or any bird, was discovering in the trees and birds and beasts his kindred elementals, as though they and he were at the dawn of creation:

When I came forth this morn I saw
Quite twenty cloudlets in the air;
And then I saw a flock of sheep,
Which told me how those clouds came there. . . .

I gazed me up, I gazed me down,
And swore, though good the likeness was,
'Twas a long way from justice done
To such white wool, such sparkling grass.

His denunciation, in other verses, of the cruelties and sufferings which have shamed the sun since human life began, conveys the indignation of one whom no sophistry, no smug fatalism, can influence. He encounters a blind child, and in spite of the beauty that he sees around him in the garden, "where are bees, and flowers, and birds, and butterflies," he is dumb. He refuses to describe and praise them to

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have a vicarious enjoyment. The pain of feeling what she is missing would, he is honest enough to know, be greater than that enjoyment: such sincerity and unselfishness might have been William Blake's. In other poems he reveals a dismay at "man's inhumanity to man" that was not outdone by Robert Burns himself: but Davies makes the shocked exclamation of one who is reluctant to believe that the conscience of the perpetrators needs any lash more drastic than the simplest irony.

There are moments in "New Poems" when the awareness of life's sorrows, even the inevitable sorrows, oppresses him so heavily that he can only marvel that the burden is not lifted. The moment of "Music" is an example. "When Music plays it bringeth woe for something dearer Time hath ta'en which never can be ours again." But although, like the old beggar who, hearing the music, feels such loss of "days that never more can come," the poem is overwhelmed with the poignancy of music he strives to remember, heard long since "when we were young, when we were gay, and never thought Death lived." There are anodynes, the poet suggests, for this consciousness of woe: they lie in the appreciation of Nature, in "good old ale," and in the possession of a sense of humour. No better drinking song than "Ale" has been sung since the Elizabethans—

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" **One quart** of good old ale and I feel then what life immortal is." " Toothache " is written in a half-mordant, half-boyish spirit that, as we shall observe later, has never left him. The poem tells how even Love's voice to a victim of toothache is transformed. It urges patience and seeks to soothe him, but all it achieves, alas, is that " I could not help cry out—' *The Devil!* ' " ⁹

v

From lodging-house to a house of his own: from loneliness to friendship: and from the atmosphere of crude semi-barbarity to that of culture; such were the immediate consequences of W. H. Davies's farewell to vagabondage and his accession to the ranks of the poets. He left London for his native countryside: and there he lived awhile in a house of " warm, comfortable appearance "—his own description—with evergreens and ivied walls. " A tall, spreading rose-bush stood facing its lowest window, and I imagined the bashful red roses looking in at me, as though I would not come out of doors to please them." There were primroses, an apple tree and a pear tree, " so that the front of the house was both a park and an orchard. Blackbirds, robins, and thrushes visited the grounds daily, and I believed **that** this house was their nearest approach to

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town." The house stood "on top of a hilly road, from where one could see on a clear mistless day the meeting of the Severn and the Bristol Channel: and, looking in another direction, could see the whole town without hearing one of its many voices."

Here, in this temporary home, for he did not remain there long, the poet wrote his next book. But it was a prose work this time. The literary men of standing who became his friends urged him to set down on paper the record of those early years of adventure while they were fresh in the memory. He completed the book quickly—in a couple of months, we have been told—and Edward Thomas and Mr. Edward Garnett, after reading the manuscript, decided that a preface by a well-known author would help it to gain the necessary publicity. The name of Mr. George Bernard Shaw was suggested, and not only did the dramatist respond readily to the request that was forwarded to him, but he it was who gave the book the title under which it was published in 1907—"The Autobiography of a Super-Tramp." Incidentally this book contained an advertisement of "The Soul's Destroyer" concluding with: "Post-free from the author, W. H. Davies, The Weald, near Sevenoaks."

"I volunteered for the job (of trumpeter) for the sake of his poems." So Mr. Shaw has ex-

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plained, but the autobiography, to which we have frequently referred in describing Davies's early life, is a link in the long chain of works that reveal poets to be considerable writers of prose also. The book enshrines, astonishingly, considering the moment *in* his career at which it was written, Davies's best prose-writing as well as his tramping memories, and, Mr. Shaw declared in the preface, "printed as it was written, without any academic corrections from the point of view of the Perfect Commercial Letter-Writer, (it) is worth reading by literary experts for its style alone." Mr. Shaw might have gone the whole way in his declaration and claimed that, apart from the fact that it was William Henry Davies's first contribution to sociology, a contribution that in the future will be valued as of great importance, the interest of the book lay in a genuinely traditional style—the style, indeed, which is now almost totally neglected in English letters. From the opening: "Chapter I: Childhood.—I was born thirty-five years ago, in a public house called the Church House, in the town of N——, in the county of M——," there is a quiet certainty of touch, a simple directness, and a dignity which recall great pioneers in the medium of the prose-narrative. An illustration of this may be taken from the chapter headed "On the Downright," in which is described how he joined company with a "grinder," the man of all

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men on the road who is most thoroughly detested, the reason being:

It seems that some years ago, a great wind had visited that particular town, and floored the roofs of the houses and grounded the church steeple, many of the inhabitants being injured, and not a few killed. Now it happened that the day following this great disaster, two unfortunate grinders, who had arrived in town the night before, and slept at the village inn, appeared in the streets and made a great shout in soliciting orders. Some way or another the inhabitants connected these poor wretches with the great wind, and set upon them and proceeded to beat them out of the town, coming near to killing them; and since that day the town has been visited by neither grinders nor great winds.

The narrative is steeped in this easy drollery that never neglects to be sound and pure prose, dateless prose, for certain of the chapters, "Gridling" and "The Fortune" especially, are written in a broad humorous mood with something of the confidence and open-handedness that we associate with the Elizabethans.

In the chapter entitled "Gridling" the super-tramp encounters a man of the road who introduced himself as a gridler, "which I understood to mean a grinder, although I had not seen tools

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of any description either in his hands or in his pockets." The new acquaintance was celebrated by two or three pints of beer in quick succession, " and, not having had much drink for a considerable time, I began to feel somewhat elated and began to make a laughing joke of my circumstances." The consequence was that the gridler proposed they should work together. Davies consented, although he did not yet know what the work might be. They made their way to a very long street which had respectable-looking houses on either side:

" * Now/ said he, for the third or fourth time, ^c all you have to do is to pick up the coppers. I ask you to do no more; except/ he added, grinning rather unpleasantly, * except to see that we are not picked up by the coppers/ His joke appeared simple enough, and I could not fail to understand it, but it was not at all to my relish. The last-named coppers were police officers, who would be likely to take hold of us for illegally appropriating the copper coins of the realm."

The gridler began singing a well-known hymn, singing it in the most horrible and lifeless voice his companion had ever heard.

" Now, as I belong to a race of people that **are** ever prone to song, whether it be in a public

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house or a prayer meeting, it will not surprise many to know that ere long I was making strong attempts to sing bass to this man's miserable treble, and only ceased to do so when it became necessary to stop and pick up the coppers."

An uproariously droll revelation of character follows:

"The effect of my voice on my companion was immediately apparent. His limbs shook, his knees bent and knocked together, and his voice quivered and quavered with a strong emotion. He was now singing another well-known hymn, better known perhaps than the last; and what with his tall form bent double to half its height, and the wringing of his hands in despair—a poor wretch who was apparently broken both in body and spirit—he was, at this particular stage, the most miserable-looking mortal I have ever beheld.

"He was in this old man's broken attitude when, to my surprise, he suddenly straightened his great body, and gazed about one second down the street. After which he quickly turned on his heels, saying, in short peremptory tones, * Quick march/ at the same time suiting the action to the words, in sharp military steps. What the people in their different windows, and on their doors, thought of this change, I cannot

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say. I looked down the street, **and then saw a** police officer had just turned its far corner, and was coming slowly in our direction."

Something of the burly spirit of Ben Jonson is in this chapter of comic writing. Throughout the book the style is as plain and yet as strong **and** distinctive. It was Francis Thompson who said of another poet that he counts for so much that it is impossible to write of him as a poet without the prose stylist. In the same way, after reading "The Autobiography of a Super-Tramp," it is not possible to think of William H. Davies as **a** poet only. Truly we have here, in one sense, a confirmation of Shelley's axiom that the distinction between poets and prose-writers is a "vulgar error." Davies is an original in both mediums, but, as in his verse, he has had influences in his prose also: we may trace them to Defoe and Bunyan, and a little more definitely to the Authorized Version of the Bible: which proves the soundness of his instinct, for above all others it was these that combined to make the English language beautiful.

Chapter III

Nature-Poet

i

" MY heart has many a sweet bird's song",

KVI wrote William Henry Davies in an early lyric of such bubbling spontaneity that the claim was straightway given the fullest warranty: and he added with a curiously selfless pride that his heart had also a song "that's all my own." In another poem he urged his soul to sing out this song that was all his own as well as the others, the songs

**Such as a happy bird will sing
Beneath a Rainbow's lovely arch
In early Spring;**

or, as at the equally definite close of the invocation,

**Such as a Brook sings in the wood
That all night has been strengthened by
Heaven's purer flood.**

From these few simple lines we derive as complete a statement as may be found anywhere of the

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poet's aim and motive during the phase of his career which began with his fourth book, entitled "Nature Poems," and published in the year following the appearance of "The Autobiography of a Super-Tramp." We are assuming that such a poet as he can have tangible aims and motives, for no thrush has been less self-conscious, more vocal purely for the song's sake. We think of the thrush's voice indeed when we consider the voice that is heard in "Nature Poems," just as we think of many another simple thing of everyday life—the instinctive lullaby of a mother bending over the cradle, the peasant answering peasant in melodious strain across the olive groves of Provence, the boys and girls singing in the Grecian villages at spring-time.

The gritty, tuneful wholesomeness of the thrush is in Davies's Nature lyrics : so is the element of surprise, which frequently sets us marvelling in a manner to which we feel impelled by no other poet of our time. The word "marvelling" is used in no fulsome sense, for at once when we have read the declaration of fealty to "The Muse" on the opening page of "Nature Poems"—a declaration that the author, dissatisfied with it, has since withdrawn—we come to a sheaf of verses which certainly set the first reviewers marvelling, if we are to judge by their printed opinions. Whereas the thrush flashed across the green world

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a single jewel of song, Davies sang twenty, at least, of finest lustre. Among these is "The Rain" :

I hear leaves drinking rain;
I hear rich leaves on top
Giving the poor beneath
Drop after drop.
'Tis a sweet noise to hear
These green leaves drinking near.

Others as lustrous include "Robin Redbreast," "A Maiden and her Hair," and "Jenny," in both of which, we may remark, the comparison is of woman to Nature, not Nature to woman:

And, like the hay, I swear her hair
Was getting golder every day;
Yes, golder when 'twas harvested
Under a bonnet stacked away. . . .

"Nature's Friend," "Early Morn," "Day's Black Star," "School's Out"—a triumph in staccato—"A Happy Wife," which contains a delicious picture of horses rolling on their backs "until the sky's kicked small enough—they think"; "Joy and Pleasure," "Truly Great," "In Days Gone," ("I had a sweet companion once,") "The Boy," "Money," and "The Two Lives." These are shining examples. We accept them as the thrush's song is accepted: and, as the birds, so is he to be understood and appreciated not only by a child—

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And when the Sun comes out,
After this Rain shall stop
A wondrous Light will fill
Each dark, round drop;
I hope the Sun shines bright:
'Twill be a lovely sight—

not only by children, but by those men and women whose childhood, in their deepening manhood or womanhood, has persisted. They are intensely acquainted with it, we can even say, because they have read Charles Dickens and Lewis Carroll, Walter de la Mare and William H. Davies. There are, indeed, moments as we read, when the man or woman *is* the child : for who among us, sophisticated though our generation inevitably compels us to be, has not uttered that cry of child-pleasure which rises from our past as we read, in a lyric entitled " The Bird of Paradise " that belongs to this early period but was issued five years later than " Nature Poems," " How rich and great the times are now," just because the poet has experienced in the one moment a rainbow and a cuckoo's song—wonders that may never come together again: " may never come this side the tomb."

il

" Nature Poems " is the first of six volumes which, published between 1908 and 1917, contributed to the elevation of W. H. Davies to his high place among the natural singers of our beautiful

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green earthly life; and by natural singers we mean those whose work is different from the contemporary equivalent of a blue tile from ancient Egypt or a vase from old Athens, as so much poetry, and good poetry withal, is content to be. Following "Nature Poems" came "Farewell to Poesy and other pieces" in 1910, "Songs of Joy and others" a year later, "Foliage" in 1913, "The Bird of Paradise and other poems" in 1914, and "Child Lovers, and other poems" in 1916. The level of the two hundred lyrics this tabulation represents was not lowered; although the author himself, who has for ever been his own sternest critic, did not hesitate to select and reject when an "omnibus" volume of his poetry was made twenty years later, in 1928. Thus, to take one example, twenty-eight pieces were subtracted from the "Songs of Joy" and thirty-eight retained, and even taking into consideration the necessity of pruning so that the "Collected Poems, 1928" might be kept to a reasonable bulk it is obvious that Davies's choice reveals his preferences, especially as a foreword informs us that "in this one volume are collected all the poems I care to remember." We are tantalized, however, by the next sentences: "and a number of others that I would like to forget. . . . It is a question of public demand, for people prefer an author as he is, at his worst as well as

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his best. But the author has this consolation: no two readers will agree as to which are his best poems and which are his worst."

Nevertheless from each of those five volumes that followed "Nature Poems" during the next eight years we can readily take twenty lyrics of lustre fine enough to match that of the shining "Nature Poems." "The Sluggard" and "The Kingfisher" may be taken to lead the score chosen out of the volume, "Farewell to Poesy," which incidentally is the title of a lyric that follows closely on the Readers in quality, in spite of a resemblance of sound at the end of the two opening lines of the second stanza:

Sweet Poesy, why art thou dumb ?
I fear thy singing days are done ;
The poet in my soul is dying,
And every charm in life is gone;
In vain birds scold and flowers do plead—
The poet dies, his heart doth bleed.

"The Dark Hour" is another choice, and a specially interesting one in the light of the poet's later developments, for it suggests a profundity which was soon to confound the superficial critic who was inclined to dismiss Davies's work as, to use Katherine Mansfield's phrase, "something childish." Incidentally the author, thus belittled, has had something to say about the superficial critic who, to emphasize the childishness, has

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turned parodist. It is to be found in the delicious personal note at the beginning of "Forty-nine Poems," a selection illustrated by Miss Jacynth Parsons and published in 1928 :

" One man parodies my work and when he makes a blackbird say, ' Good morning, Mr. Davies,' is praised for his cleverness. As though any blackbird would call me by any other name than plain Will Davies. Another writer says that all my gospel of content is found in * A cup of tea in a country cottage/ This again is called ' getting into the author's skin/' But if he had the least knowledge of me or my work, would he not have said : * A pint of ale in a wayside inn' ? " , . . The winking answer that turneth the laugh I

" On Expecting some Books," " Jenny Wren," the cloud poems and " Angry," are worthy of special mention in " Farewell to Poesy." " Angry " is illumined with one of the most venturesome fancies that even Davies has conceived:

**My love sits angry ; see !
She's red up to her eyes;
And was her face flogged by
The wings of Butterflies ?**

"The Philosophical Beggar" and "Fancy" are two of the rare longer poems in which imagery is so generous that it takes the breath, as though a cascade of jewels and golden coins rained down. The dominant note of the volume, and the poet's

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most persistent mood at the time, is sounded in these two pieces and in " The Green Tent" and " In the Country " :

And much I marvel now how men
Can waste their fleeting days in greed ;
That one man should desire more gold
Than twenty men should truly need :
For is not this green tent more sweet
Than any chamber of the great ?

" Songs of Joy and others," the volume of a year later, is especially memorable for two poems embodying a criticism of life—the life of the individual, the life of the community—which strikes deeper in their few lines than many a moralist or social philosopher finds possible in a whole series of volumes. To make this claim involves the risk of again being accused of fulsome eulogy : quotation would be the best reply to the accusation, particularly of the key-lines summing up life as a poor thing if, " full of care, we have no time to stand and stare," and those about a world so lovely to the grown-up " but not like what the child has seen." But the whole volume is memorable for lyrical moments which denote an imaginative search that, as Mr. R. L. MegrxSz has admirably written, " constantly shocks us into new perceptions while the poet's ostensible aim seems to be a reflection on life." " Songs of Joy," " The Example," " Fancy's Home," " Days

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Too Short," " To Sparrows Fighting," and « The Elements" also indicate the direction of his development, and it is shown all the plainer because they are set among out-and-out Nature poems, such as " The East in Gold."

The next volume of verse, issued after an interval of two years and entitled " Foliage," might also have been called " Songs of Joy," although it was the last of its kind. For a vital change was imminent in the general life that had given W. H. Davies his background—a change inevitably affecting his temper and outlook, though not his essential simplicity of spirit, which became more triumphant as the world about him increased in complexity. " My mind has thunderstorms that brood for heavy hours," he wrote in the opening lyric of " Foliage," and these thunderstorms were to gather thick and dark before the appearance of the last two volumes of what in the main is to be regarded as the work of a Nature poet. " Life is Jolly " is a song-title in the same volume, and " A Greeting " belongs to the poet who had not set much store yet by thunderstorms:

**Good morning, Life—and all
Things glad and beautiful.
My pockets nothing hold,
But he that owns the gold,
The Sun, is my great friend—
His spending has no end.**

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Hail to the morning sky,
Which bright clouds measure high;
Hail to you birds whose throats
Would number leaves by notes ;
Hail to you shady bowers,
And you green fields of flowers.

Hail to you women fair
That make a show so rare
In cloth as white as milk—
Be't calico or silk :
Good morning, Life—and all
Things glad and beautiful.

III

The nature of those thunderstorms may be gleaned from a poem entitled " Killed in Action/" which appeared in " Child Lovers and other poems " during the year 1916. But the outward manifestations of a changed world were dwelt upon remarkably seldom in Davies's poetry of the war years : he was nevertheless a " War poet" far more profoundly than most of those who exploited the facts of warfare. In an introduction to Defoe's " Moll Flanders," which he contributed to a popular reprint later in his career, he wrote:

" One of the sweetest songs in Nature is sung by the Robin Redbreast: and his song is all the sweeter for being heard when the other birds are silent. But the most effective notes of the Robin are not heard in his song, but at that time in autumn when he sits on a branch, alone,

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and does nothing but sob a few quiet notes. And in reading 'Moll Flanders' we get something of the same effect. The sentences do not sing, but sob, and we feel them all the more for that; especially because of their restraint, and the strong guard against anything that approaches hysteria."

These words might have been applied to Davies's poetry as the war approached and during the years when the sun was shamed. "The Moon" and "A Great Time," included in "The Bird of Paradise," would find a more thoughtful response, a more abiding habitation in the minds of soldiers who had been acquainted with English poetry before the red dawn of August 1914.

**Though there are birds that sing this night
With thy white beams across their throats,
Let my deep silence speak for me
More than for them their sweetest notes . . .**

—these lines are from "The Moon," and these from "A Great Time"—

**A rainbow and a cuckoo's song
May never come together again;
May never come
This side the tomb . . .**

Khaki-clad men sang rowdily about the long way it was to Tipperary, but it was to a slender volume of songs in a knapsack here and there that the

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more thoughtful among them turned **in their** quieter moments. And in "Child Lovers" that was more materially connected with the war than "The Bird of Paradise" because it came out in a paper wrapper at a shilling, and was dated, moreover, 1916, there is a poem called "Raptures" that, like so many of the others, has the poignancy of peace as well as of war. The music of "Child Lovers" is as poignant as the title must have seemed at the time it was announced. Not that it is a representative title, for, as with the majority of Davies's volumes, it is not intended to allude to more than one poem in the collection. All the time, along with verses of ever-deepening gravity, there are to be found "songs of childhood, flowers and birds" for their own sake. One of the unique characteristics of William Henry Davies is his enduring simplicity in a world so complex that most people find it devastating: another unique characteristic is the manner in which he has retained all the notes in his music. For an artistic equivalent of them *en masse*, we must look back in the history of poetry to the Elizabethan lyricists, with their innocent awareness of life's ugliness as well as beauty, their serene earthen humour, their twinkling directness of utterance and seemingly artless yet cunning preference for the unfamiliar word. Somewhere in Davies's poetry he uses **the** adjective "leaf-picking" in relation to autumn

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winds, and, elsewhere, the adjective "plump" in relation to snow. "What swords and spears, what daggers bright," he exclaims, the frost arms the morning with! How light his powder is: "fit to lie on the wings of a butterfly I" And on wood and iron, glass and stone, what curious silver work!

"If you, my, slim Jack Frost, can trace
This work so fine, so full of grace,
Tell me," I said, "before I go—
Where is your plump young sister, snow?"

Not, perhaps, until the adjective "plump" was used here in its relative sense did the description occur to anyone, poet or reader. And yet, so true it is, so fitting as we read it, that never again are we able to think of snow as anything but "plump" by comparison with frost.

This power of imposing a hitherto unimagined likeness on the reader marks not only the first-class poet, but the first-class prose-writer. We encounter Sam Weller and Sairey Gamp again and again in the London streets, but only after we have read "The Pickwick Papers" and "Martin Chuzzlewit." We observe the noble-hued sunset of "The Fighting Temeraire" any evening in summer, but only since we looked at Turner's painting. In W. H. Davies's case the power is not discernible only in his use of adjectives: there are lines which could have been written by no one

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else, about babies "wearing on each wrist bracelets of fat"; the sea "trying with savage joy . . . to smash his rocks with a dead child"; the skylark, "that small black star twinkling in broad daylight" against a white cloud; a stone that when the butterfly alights is no longer an "unsweetened stone" but a flower; and the black girl, providing the theme of what is perhaps the most happy of the poet's happy conceits, being dwelt upon for the whole duration of a poem, not merely in a word or a phrase:

I saw a black girl once,
As black as winter's night;
Till through her parted lips
There came a flood of light;
It was the milky way
Across her face so black:
Her two lips closed again,
And night came back.

"Smiles" is the title of the poem—included in "Foliage"—and for daring similitude carried through, and consistency, it will stand association with Champion's "Cherry-Ripe." This type of lyric is rare in English poetry, but W. H. Davies has several other instances, notably "The Likeness"—between cloudlets and a flock of sheep—in "New Poems"; "The Battle"—"in her face, between a Lily and a Rose"—and "Early Morn," in "Nature Poems"—"the joyful birds, the ship of gold, the horses, kine and sheep did seem as

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they would vanish for a dream " : in " Farewell to Poesy" there is " Happy Wind " : and in " Foliage"—

If I were gusty April now,
How I would blow at laughing Rose ;
Td make her ribbons slip their knots,
And all her hair come loose.

If I were merry April now,
How I would pelt her cheeks with showers. . . .

But imagination and fancy in W. H. Davies are inexhaustible. Seldom throughout his long career, almost life-long, does he make use more than once of these ideas, and certainly he never suggests that he is repeating himself, even when he speaks of " Jane's cherry lips " that " can show their white stones in a row," and when he again personifies the happy wind it is to describe it, with a chuckle, in a rather less admirable light—" dragging," indeed (" The Villain " 1), " the corn by her glowing hair into a dark and lonely wood." Humour, whimsical and sardonic in turn, is so fundamental a quality with him that we did not need this reminder of it. Since he wrote " Saints and Lodgers " and that droll catalogue of toy-sellers, fishmen, paper-men, bargees, tramps, and cadgers appeared in his first book, he has salted his writings unceasingly with humour. Sometimes it does not achieve the intended effect, an instance of failure

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being "The Toothache" in "New Poems," for which, curiously enough, the poet himself appears to cherish regard, seeing that when, later on, he made a definitive selection from the whole body of his work it was retained along with, moreover, the anecdote "Scotty's Luck" and the monologue "The Sailor to His Parrot!"—and yet he cast out such a vivid success as "City and Country." Nevertheless when there is no deliberate striving after a droll, satirical, or comic effect, when the strands of mirth are allowed to weave themselves with a degree of subtlety into a pattern which blends pathos, indignation, and joyousness as easefully as the colours of earth are blended, the humour of Davies is unassailable.

A jar of cider and my pipe
In summer, under shady tree ;
A book by one that made his mind
Live by its sweet simplicity;
Then must I laugh at kings who sit
In richest chambers, signing scrolls ;
And princes cheered in public ways
And stared at by a thousand fools.

Let me be free to wear my dreams,
Like weeds in some mad maiden's hair
When she doth think the earth has not
Another maid so rich and fair :
And proudly smiles on rich and poor,
The queen of all fair women then :
So I, dressed in my idle dreams,
Will think myself the king of men.

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No wonder a writer in one of the weekly reviews began his review of "Farewell to Poesy," from which this poem, "The Sluggard," is taken, by wilfully misinterpreting the title and exclaiming: "W. H. Davies bidding farewell to Poesy! It is not to be thought of."

IV

In that same volume the longer poem about "The Philosophical Beggar" contains a fragment of illuminating commentary on the author by himself.

Now, wherefore should I work my flesh or mind?
I knew. Will Davies well; a beggar once,
Till he went mad and started writing books.
. . . Now let me eat; here's cake, and bread and jam—
I wonder if there's butter in between.
And here's a Christmas journal a kind dame
Wrapped round the food to help my happy soul.
What! here's a poem by the poet-tramp.

A truthful song, but 'twill not pay his rent.
An English poet! Where's the milk? Me'aw!
If he would thrive, let him be 'false as hell,
And bow-wow fierce at France or Germany.

We may accept the line: "A truthful song, but 'twill not pay his rent," as a revelation of how disproportionate were fame and fortune in the experience of William Henry Davies. As soon as fame came to him he gave up his life of vagabondage and never returned to it: he imagined he could surely manage to gain a livelihood by writing.

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The sequel can be gleaned in "Beggars" and "The True Traveller," two prose-works that were sandwiched between books of verse in 1909 and 1912 respectively, and which possess considerable autobiographical value, as nearly all the prose-works do. "I gave up peddling/' he tells us. He went to live in Kent, occupying a small cottage, The Weald, Sevenoaks, which Edward Thomas, one of his first admirers, placed at his disposal to give him an opportunity to write, Thomas himself renting a farmhouse three fields away. Davies did not expect to make an excessive living by writing; he simply thought to live "as well as a common unskilled labourer, on a pound a week."

"But I soon found out that although critics praised my poems in a book, editors were not very eager to accept them as contributions. Not only that, but their pay is small. Of course it is impossible for anyone, except myself, to know how I have been mocked since my name first appeared in print. I have had letters asking for my autograph when I have not had the price of a meal: and I have been invited to great houses when I have not had a clean collar to wear."

So he writes in "The True Traveller." In the earlier book "Beggars," he confesses that even then, speaking as the author of five books, he was still being surprised at the business side of liter-

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ature. • • . " You could never persuade a young man—and very few old men—that he could be one of the best writers of the day and yet starve had he not the assistance of private means, * True/ people say, * men of genius have starved, but the fault was that they were not recognized in their day/ But the real truth is that a man may be so much recognized that the world's praise of his work would make a very large book indeed, and yet he may not have a second shirt to his back. It would be impossible to make people believe that a man could be so famous as to be invited to the houses of the great and yet be so shabby in appearance that beggars meet him on the road and, taking him for one of themselves, say : * Hallo, mate 1 what's yer luck ? * "

An author of less equable outlook, with fewer natural consolations and more of the artificial kind, would have been sadly embittered by the discomfiture of which W. H. Davies speaks freely in " Beggars " and " The True Traveller." Besides, he had already touched bed-rock in his daily struggle, although when, " a stranger newly arrived in a strange village," he found himself sleeping alone in that " small, poorly-furnished cottage," he had to admit that there was far less cause for him to be happy than when he was " a nameless wanderer " with Brum in Louisiana, with Australian Red in Michigan, or cabined with Wee

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Scotty, and Oklahoma Sam on the cattle ships. This reflection was also expressed in "Solitude," one of the discarded pieces in "Nature Poems," where he pictures the tramps "with ready lies and solemn looks" who cheat him when, a dreamer, he comes straight from his books:

And still I would with gladness, now and then;
Be cheated by those happy wandering men.

"In the act of washing a dirty pair of socks, and lucky to have them to wash, I would receive by post a request for my autograph." . . . The poet of the twentieth century, he thinks, is likely to suffer the last pangs of hunger with one of these letters in his hand. . . . He also speaks of a man of genius shivering on a winter's night in a bed with insufficient clothing in spite of using all his wearing apparel, after having received that day "a noble tribute from the press" in which a well-known critic said that he was unrivalled by his contemporaries. "He lay all night shivering with the cold, and expected to be a poor Cock Robin in the morning."

v

The conclusion we may safely draw from all this is that the prose-volumes which succeeded "The Autobiography of a Super-Tramp" were written in the hope of extra blankets, more bread and butter. They are all the more interesting for

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that. " Beggars," the first of them, **was published** in 1909. It contains a frontispiece portrait of **the** author, with moustache, pipe, and stiff white collar, lying in a field, and a reviewer classified it **as** a work of " first-hand information on the art and craft of begging." There are chapters on the literary life, on " The Sport of Fame," and on books, in addition to those on tramping. Davies's humour, shrewd and blunt, is one of the most noticeable characteristics of the book, and he shows such a subtle sense of word-values that his vagrants are invested with a dignity and romance which must have led the most conventional reader to an understanding and appreciation of the " wanderlust" that takes a man beyond the pale of civilization. "The True Traveller" is still more irresistible in this regard, and we may pass to a consideration of it and of " A Weak Woman " as soon as we have made a brief quotation from the chapter on books which in " Beggars " provides another valuable fragment of reminiscence. He recalls a week's reading in the free library at Reading which he thought the best week's enjoyment he ever had. How unimportant that he lived on as little as five shillings for six days, when " I never did, and never will again, have so much enjoyment out of reading matter. Of course what increased my pleasure was the thought that I **was** letting a small income accumulate so **as** to **publish**

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a book of my own: the manuscript was in my pocket then, and in two more months I would be an author."

The prose successor to "Beggars" was "A Weak Woman," the only novel that W. H. Davies wrote in his first twenty working years, and therefore to be dwelt upon, although he has since dismissed it as "a pest to be exterminated at sight." He would go so far as to offer "twopence for every front page that comes my way, in the same way as we offer a penny for the tail of every rat that is killed." Those who accept the offer will be doing "more good to the community than any rat-catcher that ever lived, although he boasts of twenty thousand tails."

"A Weak Woman" depicts life in the crude, and is what the theatre experts might call "legitimate drama that eventually changes to variety," for half-way through the rambling story of a family on whom a daughter's vagaries react tragically the author's main interest appears to branch away in the direction of stories and sketches. Maud, the elder daughter of the family—there are also Lucy and Sam—is so heartless in her love affairs that she shows complete indifference when an infatuated man cuts his throat. She marries, but soon she leaves her husband and disappears. Disappears, moreover, from the story, after the reader's interest has become centred in her. This

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interest is now demanded for her brother, Sam, a young artist who goes to London where he has many amusing adventures, in which he is joined by his fellow-lodger, a young poet—not "one of the many thousands that string together a few rhymes and call themselves poets." These adventures occupy half the book and include some excellent incidental sketches, especially one entitled "Helping the Poor" that concerns a pavement artist to whom Sam charitably lends his canvasses and is swindled out of them. Eventually the father of the family dies, and Sam's other sister, Lucy, joins with him in setting up a London home. He marries a girl he has saved from a bully on Hampstead Heath. Maud reappears, only to be murdered by her wronged husband, who is thereupon killed in a street accident. Lucy marries the poet, who has made his fortune out of a bawdy novel 1

It will be gathered from this summary that the structure of the novel shares the drawback of the woman specified in the title: but in spite of the author's later disrespectful attitude, its faults are not unredeemed for the student of his work. There are several delicious character studies, notably of Mrs. Figgs, the landlady who effects an extraordinary change of face and voice at will—by leaving out or fixing her false teeth! Her lodger, the Major, who is for ever threatening to

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go elsewhere and yet stays, is a creation* Finally, the novel is written in characteristic style, of which the following is an example: "It was too warm a day to be walking much, and it was very pleasant to sit somewhere and watch the busy life of other people. On the top of this 'bus I could smoke my pipe and enjoy a light breeze, and not be jostled by the teeming life around me."

"The True Traveller" appeared in 1912, and it may also be described as fiction, as well as reminiscence. In it we encounter more "blowed-in-the-glass" hobos, more queer people—the terrible drunkard who yet every night saved one halfpenny for a clean paper collar: Mrs. Flanagan, "a pure woman in spite of her naughty tales"; the brothel-woman who kept a soup-kitchen—in the brothel; the religious beggar (whose story is rich drollery); and the man who, while toasting a red herring in a common lodging-house kitchen, drew a comparison between the blood of our English nobility and that of the Bourbons "in favour of the latter, for he claimed to be one of them." Mrs. Flanagan's best joke related to Paddy Maloney and his wife Bridget. One day Paddy reminded Bridget that when he first went courting her she had no boots and stockings to her feet, and possessed little more than her "bare legs and a Bible." To which Bridget retorted: "Ah, me foine fellow, if ye had

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paid as much attention to me Bible as ye paid to moi bare legs, shure ye'd be the Pope of Rome to-day."

There is a solidity and conviction about the best of the writing in "The True Traveller" that suggest the work of Defoe. Only once does the author suggest a lack of certainty in his view of human nature, and this, which refers to his tribute to the harlot, will not be apparent except to the reader of "A Weak Woman," where the narrator is made to say: "She (Maud) was loud, greedy and selfish, and Lucy was quiet, temperate and self-sacrificing. If any sickness had come on my wife Helen I know well which sister would have been ill herself after Helen recovered." "The Woman in the Woods" is an instance of the author's consistency elsewhere, especially at the end: "It was a most extraordinary thing to meet a woman of that kind in the woods, far from any large town, and I often think of it now. For this woman was so loving that although I was a complete stranger she could not help making herself a sweet nuisance, and I was very sorry to see her go." Also Defoe-like is "Back in Baltimore," a vivid, homely, exciting narrative of the adventures of two strangers with money at a brothel. We need make no comparisons, though—it would be difficult to do so—in giving examples of the sly, dry commentary that enriches Davies's prose, here

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as elsewhere. "I was determined," he tells us, "never to work for a master again unless he could give good references." And his views on ale, tea, and chocolate could have served the useful purpose of being quoted on behalf of anti-Trohibitionist America. "It is only in a public house that a stranger can dare to speak familiarly to another, and be answered in the same cheerful Spirit. You can do that over a glass of ale, but not over a cup of tea or chocolate. It is a cold life to be a stranger and a teetotaller in a large city."

The most successful story in "The True Traveler" is also the drollest. It concerns one Sullivan, an unsociable, not very prepossessing personage, who was suddenly inspired to make a public confession of his sins, "which men of his type often do, so as to enable them the better to get assistance."

He strode on to the platform at the mission house and informed the audience that he was not only the worse drunkard in the city, but that he was a scoundrel and a very dangerous character who had served one long term in prison and ought to serve many others, for crimes he dared not mention. In actuality he was only a harmless beggar.

"I was very much surprised," the narrator goes on, "to see Sullivan, the night after his confession, sitting on the platform and wearing a white collar and a new black tie. . . . On the third night he

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was wearing a new pair of boots. . . . On the fourth night he was dressed in a new suit of clothes, and had a white handkerchief and a pair of light gloves. . . . On the fifth night he was wearing a gold chain. . . . On the sixth night he opened the meeting with prayer and then sang a song, the words of which he claimed to have composed out of his own head, to fit an old familiar tune. This song he sang three times in succession, so that the audience should remember it. . . . On the seventh night Sullivan was understood to be engaged to the rich widow who was the main support of the mission."

When W. H. Davies wrote on Daniel Defoe he expressed a preference for "Moll Flanders" to the moderns in words that might in their turn be quoted on behalf of his own uncommonly individual prose-works on Nature and the natural man—in "Nature," a short book which appeared in 1914, he got back to the main theme of his period as a poet of earth, and with "A Pilgrim in Wales," dated 1917, he may be said to have closed it:

"How much more to be preferred was this simple candour in *Moll Flanders' to the suggestive hints in some of our modern novels: works that have all the appearance of being pure wells, until we come to drink, and then find a loathsome reptile comes up from the bottom to join its lips to ours."

Chapter IV

Philosopher

I

IN his introductory prose to the Abbey Classics edition of Defoe's "Moll Flanders," written in 1924, the poet W. H. Davies makes a challenge to criticism. He asks why, when we come across a thing of plain simple beauty, should we try to analyse it? "Is it not better to leave it to the imagination? Its richness lies in being undiscovered, like the riches of Eldorado."

He proceeds to urge the claim that it is no more possible to give the full reason for the curious fascination of the work that follows his introduction than it is to explain the magic in a single line from Wordsworth, "Will no one tell me what she sings?" All we know, he concludes, is that ^cwe are caught in a charmed circle with only one fear—the fear of being released."

It is with no analytical purpose, but in an endeavour to trace the creative progress of W. H. Davies himself, that as our consideration of his

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writings brings us to the end of his first dozen years of authorship we pause and look back upon him in a twofold character: poet of rebellion, poet of Nature. . . . To do so may be laying undue emphasis on classification, but the risk involved is not very dangerous. Therefore, let the fourteen books published between 1906 and 1918 be roughly defined as having expressed two dominant moods, one being uppermost in the volumes from "The Soul's Destroyer" to "The Autobiography of a Super-Tramp," the other in those beginning with "Nature Poems" and including "A Pilgrim in Wales." Inevitably these moods had undertones; religion, philosophy, and love were always the poet's preoccupations, and in flashes they become dominant in their turn—more and more dominant until a time came when they were overtones in more than flashes, although Davies's technical simplicity was so disarming that the critics continued to speak of him as Nature poet exclusively. Nature poet, of course, he has remained, for in his work throughout his maturity we may trace an arabesque of themes, and the symbols of Nature, bird and beast, tree and flower are always being employed. So persistently does he ring the changes on his moods, however, that to take the risk of marking the phases of his later output as we did in the first dozen years would be inadvisable. Therefore we are content to fall back

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on the ruling of Davies himself, implied in **the** passage from his Defoe essay already quoted: " When we come across a thing of plain simple beauty, why should we try to analyse it ? "

II

Towards the end of the war, when every poet became savage or mute, W. H. Davies was able to collect and publish " Forty New Poems," including a number of joyously spontaneous lyrics which we can almost believe to have been the inspiration of Mr. Siegfried Sassoon when he wrote:

Everyone's voice was suddenly lifted;
And beauty came like the setting sun:
My heart was shaken with tears, and horror
Drifted away. . . . O, but Everyone
Was a bird. . . .

The horror of four years drifted away, indeed, from those who heard " Everyone's " voice suddenly lifted in the song " Raptures " that opens the Davies volume :

Sing for the sun your lyric, lark,
Of thrice ten thousand notes ;
Sing for the moon, you nightingales,
Whose light shall kiss your throats ;
Sing, sparrows, for the soft, warm rain,
To wet your feathers through;
And, when a rainbow's in the sky,
Sing you, cuckoo—" Cuckoo ! "

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Later in the collection there is a poem entitled " Exalted Flower " that begins :

No more of that, you butterfly,
v That lie so still on this green leaf,
Pretending you're a flower again ! . . .

and on another page a poem of Easter:

What exaltations in my mind
From the love-bite of this Easter wind!
My head thrown back, my face doth shine
Like yonder Sun's, but warmer mine . . .

with more lines about the " exalted flower "

A butterfly—from who knows where?—
Comes with a stagger through the air.
. . . Perhaps he thinks of pressing tight
Into his wings a little light!

^{<c} Everyone " sang . . . beauty came . . . horror drifted away. . . . Incredible it seemed at the world's darkest hour I . . . Surely the explanation is that " Everyone was a bird " ! But we listen again: we turn to others of those " Forty New Poems " and there we find a music that bubbles forth from no bird's throat.

Play, little children, one and all,
For holly, holly on the wall.
You do not know that millions are
This moment in a deadly war. . . .

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But thou, my friend, art lying dead:
War, with its hell-born childishness,
Has claimed thy life, with many more:
The man that loved this England well,
And never left it once before. . . .

Davies had given up the small cottage in the country and removed to London, so that he was not aloof from the war, as those exultations over the birds and butterflies and Easter wind might indicate. Instead he was at the heart of its horror :

Millions of men whose Christmas bells
Are guns' reports and bursting shells;
Whose holly berries, made of lead,
Take human blood to stain them red ;
Whose leaves are swords, and bayonets too,
To pierce their fellow-mortals through.

He pleads to his thoughts in vain:

Stay home and hear the birds and bees
And see the blossoms grow ;
And mock them both—when Echo mocks
The bird that cries " Cuckoo " ;

" For Love, alas I . . . has many a feather stained with blood." And as he went walking down the street—

There's many a soldier I see pass,
And every soldier has his lass.

Moreover he had suffered a personal loss through the war in the death of his friend Edward Thomas, known as a poet to-day, but then as the author of much criticism, biography, and belles-lettres,

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noticeably "The Life of Richard Jefferies."! Thomas is also the principal figure in "As If Was" and "World Without End," two exquisitely written volumes of remembrance by his wife, "H T." "Of all my literary friends," wrote Davies in later years, "Edward Thomas was the kindest and the most sincere. Just after the publication of my first book, when my work made more noise than money, he placed at my disposal a small cottage in the country to give me an opportunity to write." Incidentally, in the same essay, which was contributed to "Voices," a magazine of prose and verse edited by the present writer soon after the end of the war, there is a characteristic reference to the "big, saucy, able-bodied beggars" of the literary trail. "Thomas was too gentle, and not blustering enough to compete with others who were less able to do the work. We find it the same when a big, saucy, able-bodied beggar can make more money than even a man that is blind.

"I remember that Thomas told me one day of how a certain literary giant, whom he had approached for work, kept him following at his heels for half an hour while he was doing other business; and when he looked into Thomas's face and saw its weariness and disgust, said—
'You don't look happy, but you must follow

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me if you want a bone to pick/ When I heard this story I made little of it, hoping that Thomas would do the same, but it made me furious to think a quiet unassuming fellow like Thomas should be beholden to a pig like that."

After his friend had left Kent Davies used to meet him at lunch and tea every Tuesday, with Edward Garnett, W. H. Hudson, Walter de la Mare, Ralph Hodgson and others. The last time he met Edward Thomas was on the night when he was going to the Front. " He had asked several friends to meet him, but for one reason or another only two came—Roger Ingpen and myself. I was suffering from great nervous fatigue on that occasion, for I had been sitting all day to Epstein for a portrait bust. But I was glad to be there, especially as his other friends had such important engagements. After Roger Ingpen had gone, we walked up Charing Cross Road together, silent, and neither of us feeling comfortable. Probably I was the last of his old friends to wish him good-bye."

The irony of these quotations was emphasized in a final note on the strange experience of Edward Thomas as poet—that " in spite of keeping his poems going continually from editor to editor, he did not succeed in getting one accepted, not even one," and yet was published and acclaimed after his death as poet above everything. (" How quickly

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these editors have changed their minds 1") A similar irony is apparent over and over again in W. H. Davies's "Forty New Poems," especially where he writes:

**Hear how my friend the robin sings!
That little hunchback in the snow,
As it comes down as fast as rain;**

and in the verses ending " But what gives me most joy is when I see snow on my doorstep, printed by their feet."

**What happy hearts those feathered mortals have,
That sing so sweet when they're wet through in spring ! . . .**

So Davies kept his happy heart and sang " se sweet" in spite of circumstances which had become well-nigh intolerable. He thus exposed the fallacy of the superficial critic who believes that a poet should of necessity be so heedful of the contemporary scene that every noise and nuisance must have its echo in his work. " It is not merely a matter of vocabulary and technique. It is a matter of courage. We are not at the moment living in a pretty world, and the contemporary poet cannot be fastidious. In his search for the ideal or the ideally poetical, like all cowards he will find himself imagining lies. The work of the imagination must begin by a courageous attempt to apprehend the actual. Fear is the father of falsehood and trivial verses." The passage is from a com-

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mentary, intended to be severe, on the present-day poets who do not appear to respond to the demand that they should, in the words of another commentator who shares the fallacy, " show a consciousness of a realization that they themselves are alive here and now, in a day that, whatever else it may be, is not lethargic ! " The poet, this commentator goes on, who would speak with the voice of to-day, with what vigour and resource he could articulate ! " What reservoirs, or rather I should say rivers, nay, torrents of energy he has to draw upon ! " Never surely, he thinks, have poets found themselves in such a surge of energy—physical, intellectual, and spiritual. " The very atmosphere they breathe is charged and seething with vital and invigorating ideas—scientific, social, and religious ; while the material world in which they move and have their being is teeming with suggestions and inspirations for new poems. A world indeed with no security; an atmosphere which is bewilderingly chaotic; but security is death to the poet." The exposure through Davies's poetry of such a sorry misunderstanding of the poet's function may be completed by a reference to the fact that the most widely read and most discussed poet in America during the years of post-war chaos has been John Keats, author of " Ode on a Grecian Urn," " Ode to a Nightingale," and " To Autumn." (The contemporary scene was not exactly " pretty "

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when Keats's masterpieces were written, and his day, " whatever else it may be, was not lethargic.") According to those who hold the fallacy with which we are dealing, the harassed peoples ought not to be reading Keats, but those poets who have availed themselves of the " considerably augmented vocabulary and wonderful range of fresh and stimulating imagery " provided by " science and engineering and all the multifarious enterprises of mankind to-day." The majority of Davies's fellow-poets during the Great War showed an adequate " apprehension of the actual." Fifteen years later, it does not seem to be their work that reveals to us fresh aspects of the everlasting : it is the non-war poems that W. H. Davies wrote—in wartime : such as " On Hearing Mrs. Woodhouse Play the Harpsichord "—

With those great bursts that send my nerves
In waves to pound my heart away—

and " Come Let Us Find a Cottage, Love," one that's " green for half a mile around " (which was probably written after a reading of Sir Walter Scott's " A Weary Lot is Thine ") :

And early on a summer's morn
As I go walking out with you,
We'll help the sun with our warm breath
To clear away the dew,
My love,
To clear away the morning dew.

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This is not the outcome of fear, an "imagined lie," a refusal to see the disruption of an era. (If we need proof of that the same poem contains it: " 'Tis strange how men find time to hate, when life is all too short for love.") Like Mozart's music, in which you would never discover that the composer's "actual" life was marred by poverty, humiliation and utter disillusion, or some of Beethoven's which it is not possible to believe on prima facie evidence was composed within sound of war guns, the poetry of W. H. Davies establishes anew the triumph of the imagination, the supremacy of the human spirit.

in

Having perceived that in Davies's poetry vital and invigorating ideas (again to use the critics' terms) mean something different from a preoccupation with the mere circumstance of the contemporary scene—or rather, with one aspect, for "childhood, birds and flowers" are not outside it—we come to a book in which his philosophy is expressed more definitely and consistently than ever before or since. It is "The Song of Life and Other Poems," published in 1920, and one of the thirty-five short pieces that precede the lengthy title-poem is further evidence that the poet has had his own awareness of how the battle of life is waging. In this piece a rat speaks. On a bed

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lies a woman almost dead, and she is alone. " Her cat's gone out for his delight, he will not come again this night." The husband is drinking *in* the pothouse, the son and daughter are also sordidly occupied: therefore—

" Now with these teeth that powder stones,
I'll pick at one of her cheekbones:
When husband, son, and daughter come,
They'll soon see who was left at home."

And yet, characteristically, the changes are rung on the poet's moods with such swiftness that only a few pages away we find the songs that carry on triumphantly the Davies tradition in which Nature and the symbols of Nature are paramount: " This is Love's Silent Hour," " Let me Confess," " The Coming of Spring," and " Oh, Sweet Content" :

Oh, sweet content, that turns the labourer's sweat
To tears of joy, and shines the roughest face;
How often have I sought you high and low,
And found you still in some lone quiet place.

Here, in my room, when full of happy dreams,
With no life heard beyond that merry sound
Of moths that on my lighted ceiling kiss
Their shadows as they dance and dance around.

Or in a garden, on a summer's night,
When I have seen the dark and solemn air
Blink with the blind bat's wings, and heaven's bright face,
Twitch with the stars that shine in thousands there.

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IV

" The Song of Life " is an expression of personal faith, a testament. Nearly all the moods and phases that Davies's shorter poems have represented, and are to represent, have their epitome in its fifty-eight stanzas. It begins gravely : " When we forget, and laugh without a care, Time's Prompter, Death, reminds us what we are." Immediately, therefore, the Fitzgerald version of " The Rubaiyat of Omar Khayyam " challenges comparison, and although Davies does not keep strictly to a technical form that is also similar the challenge is met in a fashion that keeps the poetic interest as well-maintained as the testament itself.

Death gives a Royal Prince the same dumb grin
As to the beggar's wayside brat of sin.
The cunning Spider soon himself must lie
Dead in that trap he sets to catch a Fly.

Here we have a slight " tightening " of the familiar Davies method of unrhymed first and third lines, but the *a abb* endings are not rigidly insisted upon when the poet finds them irksome. One of his triumphs is that his lines are rich enough with a peculiar, individual music to cause the absence of rhyme, or a variation of the rhyme-scheme, or even the number of lines in a stanza, to be unnoticed, except by the student who is watching the method with technical interest. Here, in a stanza which

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come again, sweet Nature, to your haunts . . . full of love to last till Life has gone." He dwells on the delights that will be his, one by one: the delight of letting a brook "run singing to my lips," of walking again "your Meadows," of stroking the foreheads of "your Cows," and "clothing" his fingers in the horses' manes.

And many a charming truth will I discover;
How birds, after a wetting in the rain,
Can make their notes come twice as sweet: and then
How sparrows hop with both their legs together,
While pigeons stride leg after leg, like men.

He resolves to travel and "sail the seas again, and reach strange port, and light a fire in many a silent wood." To Southern lands he'll go; and up North, where steel "more cold than death can burn the skin off my naked hands." In such tremendous trifles

. . . I'll forget these deep and troubled thoughts;
How, like a saucy puppy, Life doth stand
Barking upon this world of crumbling sand;
Half in defiance there, and half in fear—

and to those who complain that this is but an escape from "life" he would, no doubt, reply that the escape is into life, the quiet life of Nature.

v

"The Hour of Magic," his next book, published two years later, may be regarded as the sequel to

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" The Song of Life/* for the hour of magic is that in which the moon "with her bright wand has charmed the tallest tree to stand stone still with all his million leaves ! " and in which " I feel around me things I cannot see," and "hold my breath, as Nature holds her own." It is then that all creatures believe a miracle has happened,

And wait to hear a sound they'll recognize,
To prove they still have life with earthly ties.

This exquisite lyric strikes the keynote of the volume, which includes work equal to anything W. H. Davies has written. The persistence of his early simplicity is astonishing. " The Beautiful " is a poem that might have come from his untouchable mind in the days of " Nature Poems."

Three things there are more beautiful
Than any man could wish to see :
The first, it is a full-rigged ship
Sailing with all her sails set free ;
The second, when the wind and sun
Are playing in a field of corn ;
The third, a woman, young and fair,
Showing her child before it is born.

And yet for all this unique simplicity we feel that the observation is maturer and capable of new depths. " Pastures," " Her Merriment," and "Strength" support this feeling in us. The element of love and sex has a place there, and

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" Joy " is a religious poem that Donne might have written if he had been less preoccupied:

**Come, Death, give me life's perfect end ;
Take me
In my sleep, Oh Death, and do not
Wake me.**

Perhaps the outstanding example of this maturity, however, is " Lamorna Cove," which, although a Nature poem, has a technique so subtle that its qualities are not wholly revealed after many readings. When Mr. Edward Garnett made a selection of the poems of W. H. Davies in 1928 he did not include " Lamorna Cove." The only acceptable reason for the exclusion of a masterpiece is that the selection aimed at the greatest possible variety of subjects. " The Hour of Magic," as a book, marks the occasion of a pleasurable change for the author so far as production and publication are concerned; after the death of A. C. Fifield, through whom—a gallant publisher!—the majority of Davies's books had appeared, the imprint of Mr. Jonathan Cape was borne on his title-pages, and the association has continued ever since. This first Cape issue was made especially beautiful by the black-and-white decorations of William Nicholson who, it may here be mentioned, was one of a remarkably wide circle of artists who have been fascinated by the phenomenon of Davies, so that

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he has sat for his portrait to Dame Laura Knight, Augustus John and W. Rothenstein (among others), and he has also sat to Jacob Epstein for a bust which now belongs, fittingly, to the poet's home-town, Newport in Monmouthshire.

* " Later Days," the prose-volume which, in 1925, followed " Secrets," a sheaf of poems belonging to the previous year, memorializes the friendships of William Henry Davies not only with these famous contemporary artists but those with all sorts and conditions of other people, from a Prime Minister to a charwoman. It is really an additional chapter to " The Autobiography of a Super-Tramp," for the author tells us (with apparent unconsciousness, but really there is deliberate wisdom in the words) that he went to live in London " not to meet people, but for more solitude." Nevertheless he did meet people, many people, for many took the opportunity of meeting him. How vividly those afternoons in the little parlour above a shop in Great Russell Street, Bloomsbury, are remembered by the present writer, who was received every Friday by the " Super-Tramp " at home; especially the long cheery talks about poets and poetry over a cup of tea at the fireside . . . And supper afterwards, perhaps, at the old chop-house behind Piccadilly Circus which Charles Dickens used to visit; when another poet of our time, Mr. Ralph Hodgson, sometimes made a third in the,

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party, **and** his inseparable companion, a buH-terrier, **a** fourth!

It was, however, not long before Davies retired to the country again, following his marriage. He lived for a while at Oxted, Surrey, and before he eventually removed to the Cotswolds, where he ha§ since made his permanent home—at Nailsworth, Gloster—he found time to look back and write this "pendant," as he calls it, to the "Auto-biography." Among the writers presented in this volume is Joseph Conrad as well as W. H. Hudson, Edward Thomas, and Edward Garnett: and Walter Sickert is included among the artists already named. Prominent among the social and political personages with whom the poet came into contact when he gave readings of his own verses in aid of war charities during the war-years are Lord Balfour, Lady Cunard, and Lady Randolph Churchill. It was about this time that he was included in the Civil List of those who receive a pension for their services to literature.

Everything that he tells about his friends and acquaintances is worth telling and often daring: occasionally it reads suspiciously as if he is giving a healthy hit back at someone in his reminiscences, for in his time he has had some unworthy snubs from persons of less worth than their contemporaries reckon them. Still, whether critical or complimentary, there is not a line of all this "per-

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sonalia " that could have been written by anybody else than Davies. Here, as an example, is a charming fragment in which he introduces St. John Adcock, late editor of the London " Bookman " :

The first time I met Adcock I judged him to be a very young man; and when he began to talk of his children I came to the conclusion that he would not have many, and that they would be young and small. So when I paid him a visit on the following day, I had my pockets full of penny toys—a monkey on a stick, a couple of tin trumpets, and a penny whistle. But when the first child came in I saw to my alarm that she was a young woman of sixteen or seventeen years of age ; and even her younger sister who came after, was far too big and old to welcome my toys. So I said nothing about them, and gave the toys to some poor children whom I met on my way back home.

The beginning of each chapter is embellished by one of his simultaneously-written poems. It must have been a fine satisfaction to many readers to be assured once again that " a small room, a cosy fire, and books " in London had not in any way impaired his powers as a lyric poet.

When I went down past Charing Cross,
A plain and simple man was I;
I might have been no more than air,
Unseen by any mortal eye.

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But Lord in Heaven, had I the power

To show my inward spirit there,
Then what a pack of human hounds
Had hunted me, to strip me bare.

A human pack, ten thousand strong,
All in full cry to bring me down ;
All greedy for my magic robes,
All crazy for my burning crown.

VI

Between " The Hour of Magic " and " Secrets " two books had appeared which also were a direct outcome of W. H. Davies's years in London, One was an anthology of " Shorter Lyrics of the Twentieth Century " in which he not only revealed his pure love of poetry but his sound critical judgment, a revelation that in the latter regard was amplified about the same time through his joint editorship with Austin Spare of a short-lived monthly entitled " Form." The foreword to the " Shorter Lyrics " anthology is full of characteristic reflections. " Anthologies/" he writes, " of the patriotic kind made for schools are mostly bad. Their idea is to foster a love of patriotism, and not of poetry. As if both these things could not be done at one and the same time by such lines as these:

Oh, to be in England
Now that April's there—

instead of the rhetorical jingle we so often read*

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However, these anthologies are in the hands of Professors, and the life of a Professor is usually a series of mistakes." And again: " There are quite a number of poets at the present time who are writing descriptive verse of a rare order, which is to be seen in most of our anthologies. But their work begins and ends in description, and neither casts any light on their own minds nor on humanity in general. These poets seem to lead easy and placid lives, without having any burning sympathies to make themselves great as men. A man can be a great man without being a great poet, but I doubt whether there was ever a great poet who was not a great man. Most of these poets are teetotallers, I believe, and lack the sympathy and generosity of men that drink. Christ, to perform a miracle worthy of our greatest wonder, did not turn water into tea, coffee, or cocoa, but into wine ! "

He gives his candid opinion about free verse. " A number of people are using it who are not poets at all. But the same thing," he adds with a smile, " can be said of a far greater number who use the traditional form of verse." He singles out for praise in this introductory essay such older poems as " that wildly beautiful lyric 'Tom o* Bedlam/ which makes me think, had Shakespeare known it, it would not have remained anonymous " : T. E. Brown's " Dora " ; and Whitman's " Out of the cradle endlessly rocking/' " Loved

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in the flood of thy bliss, O Death," and the poem that includes:

But O heart! heart I heart!
O the bleeding drops of red,
Where on the deck my Captain lies,
Fallen cold and dead.

When, seven years later, Davies edited another anthology, called "Jewels of Song," he resumed the vein in an explanation why he had included certain lyrics by contemporary poets. "The only poems I have included by living authors are those that I am jealous of and would be glad of the chance of stealing. But, to my misfortune, they are already written, signed, and published by others : and I could no more steal one of them than I could extract the stone from a cherry without breaking its skin." He anticipates the criticism that he has left out "choice lyrics by living poets." On one occasion, he recalls, when an old-time actor was asked what he would do if he suddenly forgot his part in a play by Shakespeare he answered, without hesitation : "That would not trouble me in the least, for I could easily say something equivalent 1" "The same answer is mine," writes Davies. "If any of my critics will only mention and quote the choice lyrics I have left out of this anthology I will endeavour, with your kind leave, ladies and gentlemen, to produce something equivalent, unknown, and unsigned."

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The other work which was a more or less direct outcome of that London period is " True Travellers : A Tramp's Opera." A very popular piece in the London theatre during the early nineteenth-twenties was John Gay's " The Beggar's Opera," and it is safe to say that W. H. Davies's first venture in writing for the stage was a happy result of it. For a time, indeed, it seemed that a day was to come in the history of the Hammersmith Lyric Theatre when William Henry Davies, poet of our own age, would succeed Mr. Gay, satirist of the eighteenth century ; but eventually the scheme fell through. If it had been possible to produce " True Travellers " the audiences who adored John Gay's opera would have found Davies's beggars just as jolly and lovable as the Lyric players had made those earlier ones, although they might have shown a few shreds more of virtue, as becomes the twentieth century, to redeem their ragged roguery. It goes without saying that W. H. Davies knew his beggars as well as Gay knew his, and maybe better.

The central incident of this " Tramp's Opera " was taken from the " Autobiography of a Super-Tramp "—an actual episode, therefore, of his own early vagabondage. It was presented with all the rich ability of the literary life that succeeded it. The piece contains three acts and seven scenes. It opens with the lodging-house proprietor and his wife seeking to persuade their daughter, Dolly, to

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fall in love with a mysterious lodger who claims to have inherited a large estate in the North. Dolly, however, had already fallen in love with him, "without a thought of whether he is rich or poor." The rest of the fraternity are not so disinterested, however. The landlord lends Dick money to buy clothes, his fellow-lodgers give him pipefuls of tobacco and cups of tea—with amusing consequences, of course, involving a scene in a prison cell, into which Dick is cast on the charge of "false pretences." But all ends happily and Dick wins his disinterested Dolly amid general rejoicing, including that of The Professor, Monkey Sam, Gipsy Kate, and Snivelling Tom. Shining through the racy dialogue of what remains an interesting experiment, are many little stars of song, and these were afterwards transferred to one of Davies's other volumes, although the opera was published in book-form with decorations by William Nicholson at his drollest. Had "True Travellers" been produced, indeed, contemporary lyrical poetry would have triumphed for once in a way on the London stage.

Chapter V

Poet of Religion and hope

" SECRETS," " A Poet's Alphabet," " The USong of Love/" " A Poet's Calendar," " Ambition, and other Poems." . . . Such are the titles of the volumes of poetry that appeared during the five years beginning with 1924; characteristic titles, most of them, and the work they cover is no less 'characteristic. It represents a deepening and a consolidating' of his art. W. H. Davies has travelled beyond those flowery fields of his early lyricism, but he is more than ever the Nature lover; he has taken further steps than the rebel against the wrongs of life ordinarily takes, yet the poetry to which he is stirred when man's inhumanity to man—and animals—is vivid before his eyes must stir all heaven to action. He laughs at life as often as he used to do, but he is so thoughtful a man of experience that we must regard him as, in his own way, a philosopher.

With all this his craft has remained as free and simple as ever; his technique is still the spontaneous outcome of his mood. He ventures no

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technical experiment, seeks no novelty of rhythm or metre; his rhyme-scheme continues to be, in the main, *a b c b_y*, and an apparently loose one at that, the consequence being that his effect depends, as ever, upon a hidden music which makes the sparsity of rhyme barely heeded. "Secrets" offers many an example:

**When I pass down the street and see
The people smiling so,
It's clear enough that my true love
Was there awhile ago. . . .**

"Secrets" was published in the year following that of the printed issue of Davies's "Tramp's Opera," and it contains an artistic revelation why he has continued to resemble so closely the poet he was in the beginning:

**The years passed by, and my pure love
For Nature did no longer grow:
"I'll get that love back soon," thought I—
"By living with more men than now."
But I made enemies; so I
Return to Nature, where my pain
Shall be forgotten, and my love
For humankind come back again. . . .**

How completely the volume retains the old magic is to be observed in such lyrics as "My Garden," that tells of a small bird's nest of quiet, young, half-sleeping birds which are capable, when food is about, of swallowing their own faces in half a second; "In Springtime," "when the blackbird's

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day is four-and-twenty hours of song"; " Love's Payment," in which the sheep let the brambles pull " in payment for their leaves, some soft white wool"; and " A Miracle " that tells the sequel to three glasses of strong ale—" The sur* stood still, in Joshua's day, but how the earth has danced, ift mine I " Davies might just as easily have written these lyrics twenty years earlier, but side by side there is evidence of his maturer thought, as in " At Night," where he speaks of " the silence of those mighty heavens," and " that infant's cry, so weak in power," making him " half wish that Day had brought her sparrow with his common flower." Perhaps the chief triumph of the book is " The Rainbow," as flawless as anything he once wrote in " Nature Poems " or " Songs of Joy," and leaving the reader without the slightest concern whether the poet has developed in his art or stood still :

Rainbows ate lovely things:

The bird, that shakes a cold, wet wing,
Chatters with ecstasy,

But has no breath to sing :
No wonder, when the air
Has a double-rainbow there !

Look, there's a rainbow now I

See how that lovely rainbow throws
Her jewelled arm around

This world, when the rain goes I
And how I wish the rain
Would come again, and again 1

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That so complete a simplicity can survive the pressure of a hostile, bewilderingly complex civilization is one of the miracles of modern literature. The miracle has its manifestation again in "A Poet's Alphabet," where the song "L for Light" opens with a delighted exclamation at the "lovely meadows" that the poet has seen in the sun, "with their large families of little flowers smiling beneath the quiet, peaceful skies!" Nothing, he avows, can trespass on his happy hours amid such scenes; "this glorious light that makes the butterfly go staggering like a drunkard through the air till he lies dazed and panting on a stone" (who beside W. H. Davies [could create such droll fancy?])—this glorious light is a vital necessity to him, so that even Love, for all the heed he takes, "may bleed to death" while it is there. Equally delicious is the question asked in "V for Venus"—whether the star is dumb or the poet deaf! Hour after hour has he listened there to catch "the lovely music played by Venus down the evening air/* And in "The Song of Love" we find another jewel without flaw, that is incomparable in modern verse for its childlike contentment and yet adult ponder.

Here with my treasured Three I sit,
Here in my little house of joy,
Sharing one fire, and on one mat:
My wife and my dog, Beauty Boy,
And my black Venus of a cat.

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But while those "treasured Three" are sleeping he sits and, becoming grave, asks in his mind who will be the first—himself, the black Venus, Beauty Boy, "or Dinah, whom I love the most"—to leave that "little house of joy." . . . In the Same volume we see "that black-faced nigger, Coal, into an Indian painted red," and, moreover, dancing and firing wild shots into the chimney overhead! We also see "the little holly leaves wear padded gloves of snow." Which brings us to winter and Christmas, when the poet's thought is as full of goodwill and thoroughgoing forgiveness as we might have expected :

**The Robin sings his Christmas song,
And no bird has a sweeter tongue.
God bless them all—my wife so true,
And pretty Robin Redbreast too.
God bless my kinsman, far away,
And give his sister joy this day—**

the kinsman being one who had ^{ied.nt} knave and

robbed him, so that he was so pod* his sister had
"yelped" him from her door!

But in the five books of poetry named
chapter new strands are weaving themselves**¹¹
and more dominantly, the finely coloured s* Joy")
religion and love. At one time W. * In a few

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gave little sign that he was particularly interested in the human comedy except in its relation to Nature, or that he was aware of life and death in their spiritual aspect. If he wrote of Heaven or Sin in the early days it was usually in order that he might be satirical, as in the poem about "The Little Ones" who, on Christmas Eve, wished for Santa Claus to bring a toy horse and a doll, but found nothing beside their bed next morning, for the simple reason that their father and mother had returned from the town "drunk, and making a merry row."

. . . No sadder little ones could be ;
"We did some wrong," said little Will—
"We must have sinned," sobbed Emily.

They *he* also the piece called "Heaven," in "T' Jpiets ^ of Paradise," with its seven witty cot ^ / - *diffo*^ different ideas of Paradise held by racially • • , people; the Arab, who wishes for "less and more fresh streams"; the Indian, with his vision of "hunting deer and buffaloes" ; the Yankee; the Englishman—

The heaven that fills an English heart
Is Union Jacks in every part;
9 &
.?: i*an, whose heaven is "heaven of old,
Jan cracked skulls ruanifbld"; the Scots-
*i the Welshman, who dreams of "singing

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airs no matter who feels sick or swears." Thus, incidentally, Mr. Humbert Wolfe and Mr. Osbert Sitwell, among the younger contemporary poets who can be satirical, have had an immediate predecessor who challenges them in their dourest vein. In "New Poems," the volume that belonged to the year 1907, there are verses describing a dying man who "took to the workhouse his old bones"; and there, so that he would earn his bread and sleep, they made that dying man break stones:

Since Jesus came with mercy and love,
'Tis nineteen hundred years and rive ;
They made that dying man break stones,
In faith that Christ is still alive.

Davies has never mocked at religion itself, however. He professes (in "Christ the Man") no faith in God or Christ, "yet no man ever heard me mock \ true believing one." He is content to wait for the divine revelation: meanwhile he will follow Christ the man as his exemplar in the humanity that gives its best time and thought o the poor and the oppressed. We need o further for the poet's declaration of fa —indeed, none other would seem half so and when-ever he returns to the theme the Man " was included in the earlier songs of Joy") always do his words sound consistent. In a few

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lines, moreover, he says more than many a theologian has said in a whole volume:

And if there's any Power in Heaven above,
A God of vengeance, mercy, and sweet love—
If such a judge there be, I can but trust
In Him for what is only fair and just.

Death holds, for him, no mystery that can be compared with the stark fact. It "makes us all, both king and fool, lie down at last to grin"—

And who can tell, when stripped by Death,
A monarch from his clown;
Who knows which head has worn the bells,
And which has worn the crown?

Only the old, ruthless thrusts dealt once again, perhaps; but every age, every generation needs to have them re-stated in its own terms. Davies has re-stated them so differently that they are re-stated for more generations than his own.

And perhaps it is in prose that his simplicity and surrender to the faith he holds have had their final expression. Between "A Song of Love" and *A Poet's Calendar* there was published a story of life in the open, entitled "The Adventures of Johny Walker, Tramp." Included in this book is a chapter on a religious beggar who, if the night were calm and God's heaven looked beautiful, did not care much whether he had a bed or not. In the course of conversation the old

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man admitted to the poet, then a beggar also, **that** he had worked for a brief while in his early days. "When I was a young man, he said, I went to church on the Sabbath day, morning and evening, and in the afternoon conducted a Bible class. At that time I earned my living as a shop assistant. But one day I was standing behind the counter, lost in prayer, when the proprietor came up to me and said, 'What are you doing now, staring and working your mouth like that; can't you see there are customers waiting to be served?'"

The religious beggar answered quietly that he was praying to the Lord, whose doings are above the common demands of this world. "My thoughts are in heaven, and far away from your shop." The proprietor's answer to this was exactly in accordance with the ordinary man's ideas of how separate this world and the next ought to be kept—during business hours, at all events. 'To hell with the Lord!' he cried. "Do a bit of work for me, and to hell with the Lord! You are paid to serve in this shop, and not to have thoughts in heaven." The assistant's rejoinder was: "Pay me my wages. The Lord is my Master, and Him, above all others, I serve." He put on his hat and coat, and after some difficulty received his wages. "Ever since that day, more than forty years ago, I have had no human master, . . . I have served the Lord and Him

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only, i . . . And I have wanted for nothing, in His hands, though I am now in my seventieth year."

It is not making a rash speculation to include among W. H. Davies's religious influences this serio-comic old beggar as well as the beautiful green life of earth—all the elemental things, to him, echo as though with a single voice the utterance of One who said, " Take no thought for the morrow." " When I am sick and dark depression lies all around with chilly breath' says the poet, " the teachings of my Master, Christ, are all the herbs or drugs I need/'

III

In parenthesis it may be mentioned here that " The Adventures of Johnny Walker, Tramp," is a roaring, rollicking piece of resurrectionism, for, as the author explained in one of his characteristic and always happy prefaces, " in doing this book I have used the experiences selected in ' Beggars * and 'The True Traveller/ but I have destroyed the essay-form and made the book run as a story. • . . To the younger generation it will of course be a new book, and should come between the ' Autobiography' and ' Later Days.' " In the first chapter we encounter again the Chicago brothel at which the out-of-work and the vagabond could

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get a bowl of the best soup in the city. We meet also the humbug who proclaimed to a mission audience that he was "not only the worst drunkard in the city, but that he was also-a scoundrel and a very dangerous character." Whereupon he became a convert, and "on the seventh night was understood to be engaged to be married to the rich widow who was the main support of the mission." . . . Next, Frisco Fatty and Cincinnati Slim appear on the scene, and soon we find ourselves renewing acquaintance with all the old gang, one by one, until in the final chapter the author dreams that he is their host at a grand supper, "for I was now leading a different life." How the hours passed, he exclaims, looking on these delightful companions, and listening to their rich reminiscences ! The book ends with the end of the dream. So infectious was the old life that he made up his mind to go back to it, and again enjoy the open-air camp-fires, and saunterings in strange towns, and lying under shady trees in quiet woods within the sound of fresh springs. But he had scarcely moved "when the room turned into a stone cell, and the wooden door became steel, and thick iron bars crossed the window." And so he awoke, and found himself sleeping alone "in a small, poorly furnished cottage, a stranger newly arrived in a strange village." And he had to admit, what he once wrote elsewhere also, that "as

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a man in possession of all his senses," he had fewer cause to be happy than when he was a nameless wanderer "with Brum in Louisiana, with Australian Red in the State of Michigan, or cabined with Wee Scotty and Oklahoma Sam on the cattle-ship 'Tritonia.'"

But there are two other prose-books, written since "The Adventures of Johnny Walker, Tramp," which reassure us about the happiness of that nameless wanderer in his changed state of life. "My Birds" and "My Garden" were both published during 1953, companion-volumes written in the generous, plump English that has grown riper and better-knit at every new attempt to write something outside poetry. Here again the wisdom is Davies's own: "That birds are the happiest things on earth, there seems to be no doubt; their very movements tell you that, without a study of their songs." . . . "It must be remembered that a bird only recognizes one thing as a real friend, and that is a green leaf; all other things are mere acquaintance." . . . "The man, who was not rich, usually wished for money and independence, just enough to give him leisure to worship the sun and stars, and to sit until a Blackbird had finished his song." The understanding and sympathy revealed in the charming descriptions and anecdotage are not those of a mere observer. One *'gpoty* tells of a parent thrush feeding her baby on

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the garden lawn. But when the old bird left the helpless young one for a minute, to go *in* search of food, a strange cat sprang from under the hedge and claimed its victim, in spite of the efforts of the owner of the garden. " Soon after this the old bird reappeared and ran here and there in search of her lost baby, till I, suffering some pain myself, went out for a walk, to escape the sad sight. When I returned, two hours later, I saw the old bird huddled under the hedge, as motionless as a stone. Time after time I returned to my window, and it was still there, in such a stupor that if the same cat had returned it could have had the mother as easily as it had had her baby . . ." It is not difficult to identify this poignant passage as from the pen of one who long since had declared (in " The Elements ") : " No house of stone was built for me; when the sun shines I am a bee: . . . Sings nightingale—I am a bird." Here he stands with John Keats, who wrote : " If a sparrow comes before my window I take part in its existence, and pick about the gravel." And with Sir Thomas Browne: " We live the life of plants, the life of animals, the life of men, and at last the life of spirits." Nor is it difficult to perceive that among the birds and flowers this man Davies, possessed of such sympathy that all life to him is a unity, has found complete happiness, although his old companions in vagabondage do not come to him

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even in dreams any longer, and his life as a " name*
less wanderer " has passed away for ever. Instead,
he shares song-making with the blackbird, and
every chapter in these two books, that must
fascinate the ornithologist and horticulturist as
well as the general reader, is adorned with the
newer, deeper phases of the song " that's all my
own ":

When I stand here alone at night,
And see but nothing hear—
The silence of so many stars
Is almost pain to bear.

Yet if I heard one creak in Heaven,
One little break or move—
What would become of Faith and Hope,
And of the Gods we love ?

If but one star cried out at night,
To burst like any pod—
Where shall we find, in all the Heavens,
A chapel for our God?

IV

Love, as well as religion, has had a place in the
poetry of William Henry Davies all along, although
as a dominant theme it came late to its full flower-
ing. In the beginning the strand was woven
broadly, the poet was a primitive in his loving as
in so many other things. Even when he wished

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for "a lovely wife, and gentle too," she must be contented that "no eyes but mine can see her many charms, nor voice to call her beauty fine." And later, when there are lovers' meetings to be sung, and she is gone and the singer sits dreaming alone, "•my fingers are the little people that climb her breast to its red steeple." It is but rarely that the flesh is escaped and intimations are given of the immortality of love; rarely that

**Molly, with hips and ankles plump,
With hands and feet and waist so small,
Whose breasts could carry flowers unpinned,
And not one blossom fall,**

fades into the background with all her lusciousness and leaves the poet free to sit with one who can share

**a joy
That's great enough to give
The Sun our pity with his poor
Few million years to live.**

But this pagan lover, whose love-play is like a child's—

**I thought my true love slept;
Behind her chair I crept
And pulled out a long pin ;
The golden flood came out,
She shook it all about,
With both our faces in—**

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even in dreams any longer, and his life as a " nameless wanderer " has passed away for ever. Instead, he shares song-making with the blackbird, and every chapter in these two books, that must fascinate the ornithologist and horticulturist as well as the general reader, is adorned with the newer, deeper phases of the song " that's all my own " :

When I stand here alone at night,
And see but nothing hear—
The silence of so many stars
Is almost pain to bear.

Yet if I heard one creak in Heaven,
One little break or move—
What would become of Faith and Hope,
And of the Gods we love ?

If but one star cried out at night,
To burst like any pod—
Where shall we find, in all the Heavens,
A chapel for our God?

IV

Love, as well as religion, has had a place in the poetry of William Henry Davies all along, although as a dominant theme it came late to its full flowering. In the beginning the strand was woven broadly, the poet was a primitive in his loving as in so many other things. Even when he wished

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for "a lovely wife, and gentle too," she must be contented that "no eyes but mine can see her many charms, nor voice to call her beauty fine/' And later, when there are lovers' meetings to be sung, and she is gone and the singer sits dreaming alone, "•my fingers are the little people that climb her breast to its red steeple." It is but rarely that the flesh is escaped and intimations are given of the immortality of love; rarely that

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gradually became the poet who could write:

I, who had eyes to wander here and there,
No longer have my vision unconfined:
Love brings the first grave thoughts of majesty
Into the free republic of my mind.

When " Poems, 1930-31 " was published, the careful student of Davies's work probably noted that none of its forty poems was written on the theme of Love, although the loved one is occasionally mentioned, as in " Flowers " :

But when I see the dimples in her face,
All filled with tender moss in every place—
Ah, then I think, when all is said and done,
My favourite flower must be a Mossy Stone !

Every other kind than the love-lyric is in this twentieth volume of an impressive sequence—" What man was in the Moon last night ? Her silver ore lies scattered here " . . . " Come, lovely Morning, rich in frost on iron, wood and glass " . . . ** Is this old Autumn standing here ? " . . . " The Moon his mare, all silver-bright, and he all gold, to match her " . . . " Kings, who would have good subjects, must be loyal subjects in themselves " . . . Such are a few of the opening lines, picked at random, but never so much at random that any lacks its signature, which is as indelible in Davies's art as the painter James McNeill Whistler's would be if we brushed away the familiar butterfly

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from the corner of the canvas. The next book of poems explains this absence of the love-motive, however. Published in a limited edition at the close of 1933 it bore the title "The Lover's Song-Book," and into its pages had been poured a pent-up flood.

v

Long ago, in "Nature Poems," W. H. Davies made a confession. "How I do love to sit and dream of that sweet passion when I meet the lady I must love for life!" This dreaming about love, as we have just seen, took a diversity of forms in the years that followed; but in "The Lover's Song-book" everything is co-ordinated so that we perceive at once that here is no half-man loving, but the complete lover to whom the loved one's ** pretty eyes " and the things that please them, have an undeniable share in "love's greater worth." In one poem he asks what he can find in the city shops "to please your pretty eyes": a silken gown "soft to the hand, and gossamer light," a little book with silver clasps "with golden words on all its pages," or perhaps a ribbon, belt, or scarf "to match my rainbow in the sky." And yet these articles are only important if, when she is given her choice, they both remember that greater worth: "that she and I prefer each other to any thing in Heaven or Earth."

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Again, therefore, we encounter Davies in a phase of utter simplicity, and his effectiveness as a love-poet is not different from that of any of his earlier phases. He is still the poet who sits and dreams, although his dreaming sometimes causes him vexation:

Though I sit brooding here, with my eyes closed,
Yet have I seen the light go suddenly ;
Though I have shut them fast, to see no light,
A sudden wave of darkness, without warning,
Broke on their trembling lids, and forced my sight.

So when my Love has gone out quietly,
And left me here alone, all lost in dreams,
I see the shadow of her absence fall
Across my vision, that had been too blind
To see her body in the light at all.

The reality is greater than any dream can be; and, Davies-like, he marvels at the supremacy of it even at the most trivial moments. In "Past and Present" he recalls that he has in his time watched a tiny cloud powder the heavens with "miles of soot" that make the seas all wild and rough; that he has even seen that speck sink half a fleet, and the wild rough waves drown the men of the fleet and, like eagles, swoop down to carry off the sheep in their floating pens; nevertheless—

I who have felt and seen all this,
And trained my thoughts to quiet scorn—
Am still the man to dress Love's finger,
Scratched by a little pin or thorn 1

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This lover's mood can be as light as the butterfly—and, incidentally, in the song that conveys its lightness, Davies shows mastery over the most airy form of verse:

She flics from my shadow
To her lover, the Sun;
Yet for her rare beauty,
I still follow on.

He invokes, indeed, the astonishingly fresh crystal of April as he sings of "a bee as big as a little bird, flowers red or white, pink, blue or yellow, or a bird as small as the humble bee" . . . but he does not allow us to forget the tremendous significance of Love itself, the transformation worked at its coming:

Can I forget your coming, like the Moon
When, robed in light, alone, without a star,
She visits ruins ; and the peace you brought,
When I with all the world was still at war?

So, through love, as through religion and Nature, William Henry Davies returns to his original innocence, contentment, wonderment; he recovers his individual inheritance, described long ago in "Fancy's Home," a lyric so exquisite that although in this attempt at an estimate of his poetry he has been likened to Campion, Herrick, and divers other Elizabethans, it will not be amiss if we finally speak

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of him again as the near kinsman of William
Blake:

Tell me, Fancy, sweetest child,
Of thy parents and thy birth ;
Had they silk, and had they gold,
And a park to wander forth,
With a castle green and old ?

In a cottage I was born,
My kind father was Content,
My dear mother Innocence;
On wild fruits of wonderment
I have nourished ever since.

Chapter VI

Craftsman

i

AUTUMN has fallen on the poet's garden, serene, mellow, beautiful autumn. But spring and summer linger there still; his eyes are the mirror of sprightly laughter, his speech has the amplitude, the wisdom, of a life never more alert. Beneath his step and mine as we wander through the honey-coloured sunlight the leaves crush crisply, and scattered fruits make us tread with caution. A bird is busy in the brown distance. " * The starlings chuckling over stolen fruit, " he quotes, resuming our easy, musing talk; and, stooping, gathers some of the scattered fruit. . . . " °They pock the face of all my golden pears.' . . .

"Those two lines are an example of how a thought shapes itself when it first comes to me," he continued. " It came like that as we walked here yesterday, and it may lead to a complete lyric when you have gone back to London. You ask me how I write. Well, there you are I wait

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for a thought, an idea. I never make any attempt to write until it comes to me—I simply go on with this quiet country life, content to wait, knowing for certain that it will come sooner or later.¹

"Not always, of course, does a thought lead to a complete lyric. There must be something in it of unique value to a poet. Many a thought fades into nothing. But sometimes even a single word, let alone a couple of lines, is enough. That word 'pock,' now. The bit of verse I have quoted was centred in the one word. It mustn't be *pick/ I dare say the printer will think 'pock' a misprint and change it to 'pick *! "

"In the poem you may write, then," I said, "the magic word will be *pock*. The authentic poet is revealed in an original usage like that."

"The magic of the right word!" he exclaimed. "The poet who is able to employ it makes those starlings his own, all birds and beasts are his creatures. You can easily test the poets who have never been content to follow in a tradition. Take an illustration——"

"Take yourself as the illustration," I interrupted, "when you write, say, of the cuckoo. Most poets have accepted the conventional idea of the cuckoo, but I remember that you have heard

¹ For the final version of the lines quoted, and the poem in which they are included, see "Starlings" in the volume "Poems 1950-1931," published 1932,

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it *shouting*. Cheeky in its joy. Not Wordsworth's unseen, mysterious bird, but the brazen fellow that comes right into your garden and shouts I "

He answered: " That is what I mean when I say that the poet must see things with his own eyes, hear them with his own ears; not with the eyes and ears of those who have written before him."

" The *red* berry, the *scarlet* strawberry," I said, " are not enough. In the lately-written poem you showed me this morning, the strawberry is ' full of dimples/ the plum is ' misty/ the pear is ' nipped,' and the currant ' beady, glassy-eyed.' . . ." And—this I added to myself—the poet who sees objects in that way is no mere follower of Wordsworth, as some of the critics have claimed, but himself alone, unique . . .

**The apple with her beauty moles,
The beady currant, glassy-eyed;
The golden corn, all naked there,
Without a leaf on either side.
The nipped pear and misty plum,
The yellow quince and cherry red;
The crimson strawberry full of dimples
Now lying so low in her bed.**

Aloud, I asked : " Here, in this old-time garden, in your house with its books and pictures and sculpture, with the quiet help in your day-by-day living that you are given—this ideal existence for

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a writer, indeed—do thoughts and ideas crowd upon you, the poet ? "

He answered: " Many thoughts and ideas come to me in my retreat from London, and yet, strange to say, for days and days I am often without one of value to me in my poetry. But I reckon a whole week is not lost if, after, say, four fruitless days, something happens on the fifth or sixth. If I compose a poem a week and feel satisfied with it—I need some satisfying, by the way!—I count my week's work a good one."

" But your average is higher than one a week ? "

" Sometimes I have completed four poems in a week. Sometimes I have written no more than two lines—or, rather, an unsatisfactory poem with just two lines worth rescuing. But that is only to be expected. After all, if one starts off with lines of this kind, taken from the opening verse of a poem only slowly completed :

" Kings who would have good subjects must
Be loyal subjects in themselves . . .

and, from the second verse:

*' You who have seen young Cupid's thumb
So soft and white from constant sucking—

one must expect them to take some living up to."

" The Elizabethans invariably led off in this strong way," I reflected. " Especially Campion

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"Campion," said he, "is my favourite poet; that is, if I may speak of a favourite poet as I say of the kingfisher that it is my favourite bird." . . .

"Then there is Shirley," I continued, "the author of the first line, 'The glories of our blood and state/ How rare are the poets whom we think of in that Elizabethan sense to-day! If it were not the obvious fact that every poet invariably strives to achieve his best, we might conclude that the majority of contemporary poets are afraid to start a poem in the grand manner. But such an opening is not necessarily a handicap. May not the remainder of a poem, though hardly on the same level as the first line, be uplifted by its association?'"

The answer came through the half-light, for the afternoon was fading. "Here are some lines which I called * Mangers'

"Who knows the name and country now,
Of that rich man who lived of old;
Whose horses fed at silver mangers,
And drank of wine from troughs of gold?"

*'He who was in a manger born,
By gold and silver undefiled,—
Is known as Christ to every man,
And Jesus to a little child.

"My own feeling about this poem is that the first stanza is good, but the second is better. The

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light of the second, however, throws back on to **the** first verse and gives it equal radiance. . . .

ii

"And now I am going to say something that may surprise you. In summer I don't write! I have only written two poems during this past summer, and of these there is one I am not satisfied with, for the reason I have just given—that a good opening needs living up to.

" These butterflies in twos and threes,
That flit about in wind and sun—
See how they add their flowers to flowers
And blossom where a plant has none I¹

The idea is all right. But to go on with the expression of the idea after such an opening requires something out of the ordinary. In a similar way four lines detached from an unsatisfactory remainder may stay in my mind for a long time without being completed afresh. But I would never force that completion. It will come of itself—maybe suddenly, when least expected. I believe that a good idea for a poem is never actually wasted. Be sure it will come to fruition at the fitting moment. A poet does not receive so many ideas of the right sort that his genius can afford

¹ For the completed poem ("Flying Blossoms"), see
*⁴ *My Birds*," published 1933.

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to lose some of them! . . . No, I don't keep a notebook. I did so when I was younger, but I haven't done for a long time now. The risk of my forgetting is small. Some of my poems are finished as soon as they are committed to paper."

* I said: "You have given examples of your opening lines that have only slowly been continued and completed. Walter de la Mare told me that the final lines of a poem sometimes occur to him first. Do you ever find yourself with isolated last lines, waiting for the opening to occur to you?"

"Yes, a poem has happened like that, more than once. I recall an instance: 'To-day' in 'The Song of Life':

"I have no hopes, I have no fears,
Whether my dreams are gossamers
To last beyond my body's day,
Or cobwebs to be brushed away.
Give me this life from hour to hour,
From day to day, and year to year;
This cottage with one extra room
To lodge a friend if he should come;
This garden green and small, where I
Can sit and see a great big sky.
And give me one tall shady tree,
Where, looking through the boughs, I'll see
How the sharp leaves can cut the skies
Into a thousand small blue eyes."

"You wrote that poem when you lived in London," I interjected, rather irrelevandy. "Your wish has been fulfilled."

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" Yes, my wish has been fulfilled : ' This cottage with one extra room to lodge a friend if he should come/ • . .

" My memory is not very clear about the circumstances in which * 'To-day' was written, but I can quite imagine that I was first moved by n~~my~~ impression of a tree and its leaves as I looked upward from beneath it. Originally the end of the poem may have been intended as the beginning. But once I had decided that the lines already composed were to form the conclusion, I waited for the earlier part to occur to me exactly as I wait to continue my first lines in other poems."

" You said a little while ago that some of your lyrics are finished as soon as they are committed to paper. When the idea moves you, how is the actual composition done, slowly or quickly ? "

"I am a very quick worker. Often a lyric is completed in a few minutes. It flows as naturally as a stream. All my best pieces have been written in a few minutes each. All my less-than-best have been laboured, and no amount of striving can put them among my best. What is more, I know that no poem with which I have ever had trouble will ever go among my best.

"* When I have finished a poem I have finished for the day. I never write more than one a day—it haunts me, you see, after I am supposed to have done with it! . . . If the poem seems to

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me an especially good one, I find I can't write next day either, nor for several days. Not even if I wrote a lyric in an hour early one morning would it be of any use to write again that day,

" My lines flow naturally into this, that, or the other verse-form. I cannot ever remember being so attracted by a particular form that I have chosen it deliberately; I am content to be chosen by it, just as I have been content to allow the different phases of my verse—Nature, philosophy, religion, and so on—to follow one after the other. There was a time, I remember, when the critics assumed that I was simply and solely a Nature poet. They had overlooked my being a revolutionary poet also, and it wasn't long before they were surprised into saying : ' What shall we do with this man Davies, whom we dismissed as a mere Nature poet ? Why, he can write other kinds of poetry as well!*

" Perhaps it was the desire to do bigger things, that could not be labelled, that made me write my stronger poems as a reaction from the joyous ones. . . . Always, though, natural objects have been my symbols—which doubtless explains why certain of the aforesaid critics, having noted the continued use of Nature in my work, have persisted in their belief that I am nothing eke than a Nature poet still. Another reason may be that, as a poet, my philosophical verses convey no cribbed, cabined, and confined view of life. A poet's ouriook can-

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not be definite in the hidebound sense of the term. His moods change so often—and if they did not it would be a case of farewell to poetry!

" Nearly all poets begin their careers by writing love poems. But when I came to my sixtieth year I wrote my * Lover's Song Book/ " *
 , • .

It is in a Cotswold twilight that our talk drifts to its close. And as we walk towards the house the garden path is lit by a lamp indoors. There at the bright hearthside a poet's wife and helpmate awaits the step of one whom the world has thought of as "super-tramp," tramp poet, Nature poet; but, henceforward, must look upon—and marvel at—as the genius who has gone forth into the green world of Nature, the red world of the revolutionary, the many-coloured world of the lover, of the man of religion, of the philosopher, and returned from none of them without his matchless harvest of shining song.

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¹ For some of the details in this list we are indebted to Miss Gwendolen Murphy and the *London Mercury*.

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